Finding Employability Skills in the Curriculum: Are they there?

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Introduction

The pedagogy of employability relates to the teaching and learning of a range of skills, knowledge and qualities that support sustained teaching and career development, a desired outcome of higher education. Employability skills include:

“a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Yorke, 2006, p. 8).

To monitor the growth and application of work skills in a placement environment, the Work Skills Development (WSD) framework (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2009; 2013) was originally conceived and introduced through Work Integrated Learning Programs (WIL) at James Cook University. Subsequently in 2015, Monash University librarians and learning advisers applied the WSD to guide and make employability skills explicit in the library’s research and learning skill programs in a response to the employability skills agenda.

Rationale

The literature suggests that there is potential to maximise opportunities in the regular curriculum to support, “the knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce” (Kinash, Crane, Judd, Knight & Dowling, 2015, p. 2). To this end, higher education employability strategies generally encompass a range of practical and formally assessed in-curricula and co-curricular programs. These typically include Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programs, professional placements, and industry-based experiences and internships (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Pretto, 2008).
However, ways to make the skills and abilities that students gain beyond disciplinary content knowledge an outcome of learning is challenging (Barrie, 2004). Institutional graduate attribute statements and the requirements of professionally accredited degrees describe what graduating students should be able to demonstrate on completion of their study, yet generally omit to guide educators as to how to incrementally and progressively develop work related skills within a curriculum. To address this challenge, “The WSD was developed as an assessment tool in 2009 to mirror the concepts and philosophy of the Research Skill Development (RSD) framework (Willison and O’Regan, 2006). While it aligns with the structure of the RSD it also provides a platform to have a seamless development from research skills to graduate attributes and employability related skills” (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2010, p.2).

The Work Skill Development (WSD) Framework

The WSD framework is a non-prescriptive, flexible tool that brings together cognitive and affective skills for work with descriptors of how these skills can be developed over time through the incorporation of scaffolded learner autonomy. The WSD framework consists of two axes that address two dimensions related to work skills development. The vertical axis describes skills that students need to develop in order to be work-ready. The skills are referred to as ‘Facets of Work’ and encompass the range of skills required by graduates to make a successful transition to the workplace. The horizontal axis of the WSD describes Learner Autonomy in respect to each of the ‘Facets of Work’. Learner autonomy describes the progressive development of work skills articulated in the WSD facets within a learning continuum, from a ‘high degree of structure and guidance’ to ‘self-determination’. Importantly, the WSD as a conceptual model for students’ work skill development provides the capacity for critical reflection, decision-making and independent action, so as to deliver greater responsibility for, and increased ownership in, learning. As a curriculum tool, the WSD framework offers a language through which to interpret and articulate skills gained through learning and participation in regular coursework with the range of skills valued by employers in the workplace. The various ways in which the WSD framework has been applied to inform curriculum design strongly suggest that the tool is well placed to inform a holistic approach to curriculum that embraces both discipline and skills for employability.

Workshop Overview

The workshop proposed here, is a result of a longstanding inter-university collaboration between James Cook University and Monash University Library, sharing approaches to applying the WSD framework. The workshop has been designed as a collaboration between library staff, academics, career consultants and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) coordinators. The workshop therefore reflects inter-professional
perspectives and approaches to applying the WSD as a tool to guide practice in respect to making employability skills explicit in contrasting learning contexts.

Learning Aims

This workshop aims to:

● Identify and articulate work skills
● Explore how work skills can become an explicit element in curriculum design and in work orientated learning experiences
● Interpret the relationship between students’ work skill development and learner autonomy
● Demonstrate applications of the WSD framework in teaching and learning and in professional practice.

Workshop Activities

Participants will engage in interactive group activities and discussions aimed at identifying the range of skills that students engage with in their studies that can be rearticulated as skills for the workplace. Audio-visual stimuli, scenario-based activities and examples of assessment from a range of disciplines will be used to link the skills from the curriculum to the workplace. Workshop activities will enable participants to interpret how the WSD framework as a conceptual model for work skill development can be utilised to make work skills and their progressive development explicit to both learners and educators in the curriculum.

Sharing Examples of the Work Skill Development Framework in Practice

Examples of the WSD framework applied in practice from James Cook University and Monash University are shared with participants at the workshop. There will be an opportunity to interpret the WSD framework across different disciplines and varying contexts. Exemplars of the WSD in practice that will be included at the workshop are summarised below:

Examples from JCU

At James Cook University (JCU), the WSD framework has been used in the school of Environmental Sciences with students undertaking Professional Placements. The WSD has underpinned and informed post-placement interviews with students, to assess their perceived cognitive and affective work skills as aligned with the WSD facets of work and levels of student autonomy. To draw comparisons of skill ranges and corresponding levels
of autonomy, employers were also interviewed to assess the students’ skill progression using the WSD. In this way, the WSD framework has provided a means for students and employers to reflect, evaluate and articulate what may be required to progress from novice to expert in the workplace. The most recent version of the WSD introduces the cultural competency as an important facet of work.

**Examples from Monash**

Innovative applications of the WSD framework by Monash University Library have resulted in collaborations between librarians, learning skills advisers and discipline academics to inform curriculum design with respect to the employability skills agenda. One such example which will be shared at the workshop describes an initiative at the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences. This involved the creation of an online resource (in Moodle) geared towards helping pharmacy interns identify and articulate work skills for a professional assignment requiring them to produce an effective CV. The library worked closely with the unit coordinator to produce a self-access module that facilitates student reflection and helps students to reformulate curricular and co-curricular (as well as extra-curricular) experiences for the workplace. The WSD framework provided an essential tool with which to conduct this ‘reformulation’, as it invites the unpacking of a range of cognitive, affective and practical skills. This online resource formed the basis for blended learning, with an online class designed to suit the constraints of students in internships. The workshops have been well-received by participants and continue to form a key point of interaction with the Intern Foundation Program.

A new initiative in an accounting unit in the Faculty of Business and Economics used the WSD framework to explore skills related to ethics and integrity in the workplace. The outcome of this initiative has been a re-conceptualized representation of the WSD framework to meet this specific context. The new, simplified WSD model lends itself to a discipline-specific application and shows the inherent versatility of the framework. These examples will help workshop participants see how the framework can be applied to real-life learning and work-settings.

**Strategies for Engaging Participants**

This workshop has been designed to unpack the “Facets of Work” of the WSD framework in order to facilitate the articulation of employability skills through hands-on, discovery learning approaches. The focus of the workshop is to facilitate a reconceptualised approach to enabling, interpreting and articulating skills for learning as employability skills.
Target Audience

The target audience is any educator interested in exploring methods and resources to integrate cognitive and affective skills as well as learner autonomy in the context of employability within the curriculum. This workshop will be of interest to Academics, Careers Consultants, Work Integrated Learning Coordinators, Librarians, Learning Skills Advisers, Employers and Researchers.
References


