

Workshop 15:
**Encouraging the development of employability skills for
life in the 21st century**

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Today we are dealing with a rapidly changing and often insecure future. To negotiate our way in the world and to balance the varied aspects of our lives we need sound generic skills. These skill, also known as employability skills, are:

- Communication
- Teamwork
- Problem solving
- Initiative and enterprise
- Planning and organising
- Self-management
- Life-long learning
- Technology

In addition to these skills, personal attributes such as honesty, enthusiasm, adaptability, positive self-esteem and the ability to deal with pressure have been recognised as contributing factors to overall employability. In this paper, Aspire Training & Consulting discusses the recently published employability skills (ACCI 2002) and attributes and examines ways in which educators and trainers can foster them in a range of learning environments.

Old skills for a new century

The rise of communications technology and the development of global networks have created an economic environment where information and knowledge, rather than physical resources, are increasingly becoming the key generators of wealth (Stokes 2003). The 21st century is witnessing fundamental shifts in the way people are living their lives and the way they do business. Increasingly, corporations are outsourcing work functions such as word processing, desktopping, design, storage and distribution. A huge rise in personal services has seen individuals purchasing franchises in areas such as lawn mowing, cleaning, dog grooming and car detailing. Workers must deal with deregulated and flexible labour markets. It's a future in which the ability to draw on a range of personal skills and adapt to change will be vital.

It is no longer sufficient for workers to have only job-specific skills. To negotiate this new world and to balance the many and varied aspects of their lives, people also need to be able to work well with others, be able to communicate clearly, use their initiative to handle difficulties, and be capable of organising and managing both their working and personal lives (Bentley 1998). These generic skills are what employers are increasingly seeking when recruiting staff. They come naturally to some people, but for others they need to be nurtured, practised and reflected on as an essential part of life-long learning. For learners

such as adult prisoners, offenders and young people in detention, identification and development of these skills is integral to the success they will have in re-entering society.

Employability skills

The concept of generic skills is not a new one. Many attempts have been made, both in Australia and overseas, to define them. Best known in Australia is the set of Key Competencies developed in the early nineties and incorporated in national Training Packages and some school programs. The most recent definitions, endorsed by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia, are entitled 'Employability Skills' and focus on the skills and capabilities employers now require of their workers in addition to technical work-specific skills (ACCI 2002). They have been categorised as communication, teamwork, problem solving, planning and organising, self-management, technology skills, life-long learning and initiative and enterprise. In addition, employers welcome personal attributes such as commitment, adaptability, enthusiasm, reliability, good personal presentation, common sense, positive self-esteem, motivation, the ability to deal with pressure and even a sense of humour.

Attainment or demonstration of a generic skill is not an end point in itself. Generic skills are not static. They are cumulative and can be developed and improved throughout one's lifetime. They are also not discrete. For example, it would be nonsensical to argue that any group activity required teamwork alone when communication, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise are also integral to a well functioning team. For the purposes of exploration in this paper, however, it is expedient to discuss them separately.

Communication

The development of effective communication skills has long been a basic goal of education. As information and communication technologies have become increasingly sophisticated, the skill of communication has become more complex. For example, the ability to choose the best medium for a message has become an important skill. For example, speech now includes voicemail, teleconferencing, videoconferencing; writing includes fax, email, text messaging, overhead transparencies for electronic presentation, to name a few.

We now recognise that learners' communication skills will improve if they have the opportunity to interact with people of various ages, ethnic backgrounds, careers, positions of responsibility and roles in the community. Our programs need to provide real-life situations in which learners can choose and use the effective communication skills they will require at work and in the wider community.

Problem-solving

Learners need experience in identifying a problem and solving it using logic, lateral thinking or intuition. In the workplace, as in life, problems and hurdles will arise. Learners need thinking skills to work their way through such problems. As Roderick Bruce (2003) stated in a recent newspaper article:

'The gaining of knowledge is a vital aspect of education but it has never been sufficient. You must be able to do something with the knowledge. ...Time with a teacher in a classroom is better used developing thinking skills than transferring facts.'

Learners also need to be placed in situations where unsolved problems have ‘real’ consequences. Tapping into the problems faced by the learners and encouraging them to explore various options until they find a way to solve them, is a very effective learning strategy. Prisoners, offenders and detainees will face myriad problems on release. The identification of these problems, how to solve them, how to be aware of the skills they used when working out solutions to the problems and how to apply these skills to new situations will be imperative for them.

Teamwork

Teams are the norm in the 21st century workplace. The emphasis is upon the group of people collaborating on a project and contributing their various ideas, skills and expertise to achieve an objective or meet a desired outcome. Jennifer Bryce et al (2000) remind us of an old teachers’ saying: ‘no one of us knows it all, but between us we know an awful lot’. People develop teamwork skills from an early age with their family, friends, clubs, sports teams, and workmates at work experience and in part-time jobs. However, a structured learning environment can provide situations in which people take a closer look at how teams work (the process) and reflect on, and assess their ability to, contribute to teamwork. Appreciating the benefits of working with a team and the ability to gather a team of people to assist with achieving goals will be fundamental skills for many of your learners at they re-enter society.

Initiative and enterprise

There is a common misconception that to be innovative is to be artistic. Skills like initiative and enterprise are skills that can be developed in everyone. Learners need to be encouraged to think ‘outside the square’ and to understand that innovation requires a capacity to take risk. This skill area is not just about invention. It is about thinking, defining new problems, finding innovative solutions and coming up with new ideas or new ways of looking at old ideas. In a work setting it is about ‘value adding’ to the organisation with the introduction of a new process, product concept or service. It could even be the creation of a totally new business.

Enterprise skills combine the entrepreneurial with the ability to translate ideas into action and to adapt to changing circumstances. Kearney (1991) states that ‘enterprise skills are not just skills for employment but (also) skills for deployment... (they are) marketable skills, skills which will put people in charge of their future.’

One way to foster innovation is to create environments where new ideas are recognised and shared and even better, where learners can see them being implemented.

Planning and organising

Some individuals seem to possess a natural inclination to be well organised, others do not. The planning and organising skills identified in the employability skills framework focus on the way in which those skills contribute to an organisation’s long-term and short-term strategic planning and the way that they enhance the quality of people’s personal lives.

Planning and organising are skills that can be improved through structured activities. The most difficult thing for a teacher/trainer to do is to stand back and let the learner take the consequences of not being organised. Time-management, prioritisation, research into the

task, determining the need for human and other resources, risk management strategies, developing plans of action –these skills are all used in everyday activities at one level or another. They need designated time to be discussed, prepared for, implemented and reflected upon to capture the learning.

Self-management

Self-management involves the individual being able to set short- and long-term goals for their own lives and having the confidence to pursue those goals. In a rapidly changing world, where a person embarks on a portfolio career and success is determined to a large extent by the availability of work and the individual's ability to sell their own skills and intellectual capacity, it would be very easy to lose sight of your long-term aims.

This has implications for all those working in what was previously a 'career education' mode in which they assisted people to make a wise choice regarding a career that they would probably be in for the majority of their working lives. Advisors now need to work at a higher level of generality so that the individual is prepared to:

articulate their vision for their future life

identify their strengths and weaknesses

know how to access formal and informal training and education when required

evaluate and monitor performance in various fields and

make career changes when desirable.

There is evidence that young people today are recognising the need for developing these skills. The recent report on an ECEF project entitled *Preparing for the future and living now* indicated that young people were aware of the skills they needed to develop and think of their futures in terms of a range of possibilities rather than a narrow vocational focus.

In a series of focus groups young people spoke about the importance of gaining skills such as communicating, time management, working in groups, self awareness, synthesis of information and problem solving through a wide range of personal experiences both in and out of school.

'... In school they rated most valuable the subjects that helped them reflect and consider different responses to life issues eg, English, drama and sport. Outside of school they found that part time work, family and social relations were areas that helped develop generic skills' (Stokes 2003 p7).

Life-long learning

'One of the essential survival tools for individuals, and nations, is a willingness to learn and relearn' (McKenzie, P & Wurzburg, G 2000 p. 209).

Life-long learning is about the 'perpetual student'. There is always more to learn and different ways in which to learn it. Learning is a vital component of managing the pathways of individuals and organisations.

There is a major emphasis on life-long learning in the knowledge-based economy. In fact, a life-long learning competency is included in most of the OECD countries' sets of generic skills. Importantly, life-long learning should be seen as a concept that underpins all generic skills because, fundamental to developing and improving our generic skills, is the desire to learn, reflect on our abilities and strengthen them or acquire new ones.

This is more than learning for exams. It is about time management, information management and organisation. It is about being open to learning from each other, respecting cultural diversity and taking the opportunity to learn from workmates who have different knowledge constructs. It is respecting and benefiting from interaction with various forms of intelligence—communicative, numerate, technical, process-oriented, emotional, analytical, creative or critical (Gonczi, 2001).

People need to be adept at sourcing opportunities to learn new skills and to improve on ones they already have to remain employable in a highly competitive job market.

Technology

All members of the Australian workforce now need to be proficient in the use of information and communication technologies in order for this country to compete on a global scale. Computers are now an integral part of the learning environment and curriculum in Australia from kindergarten to post-graduate education.

The term 'knowledge worker' no longer applies just to those new industries arising from use of the Internet but now applies right across the spectrum to traditional industries such as manufacturing and forestry. People are using more and more sophisticated technology to carry out their daily tasks.

One of the essential tools for lifelong learning will be the individual's ability to access online learning either in a formal, guided program or as a research activity. Computer literacy is becoming one of life's basic requirements because so many of our everyday activities are now transacted through this medium—banking, purchasing, selling, looking for and applying for work and personal organisation.

Where a person already has technology skills superior to the teachers/trainers working with them, it is a great opportunity to place them in the role of expert and to learn alongside the rest of the group.

Personal attributes

Personal attributes contribute to overall employability. Learners need to be aware that employers value and would be impressed by evidence of these attributes. Where learners already possess these attributes they need to be given opportunities to demonstrate, document and articulate them. Where the qualities are lacking, activities can be devised to foster them.

Of those attributes listed as desirable, learners can work through structured activities to improve their:

- personal presentation
- positive self-esteem
- balanced attitude to work and home life
- ability to deal with pressure
- motivation
- adaptability.

The remaining attributes of loyalty, commitment, enthusiasm and reliability are personal traits that an individual can work towards improving, particularly in a work environment. Commonsense often comes with maturity and life experience. A sense of humour however, as vital as we know it is to maintain sanity in any working life, is hard to define and even harder to develop.

Whilst these attributes cannot be directly taught, it is important to equip learners with the capacity to reflect and self-assess. This will enable them to improve in areas of weakness.

The role of the teacher/trainer in fostering generic skills

The model of teacher as co-learner/ mentor or facilitator is gradually replacing the traditional understanding of the teacher as the expert and the student as the learner/recipient. What then is the role of mentor/facilitator? It is a role that:

- involves an interpersonal relationship
- creates a positive environment for learning
- fosters the learner's learning
- encourages self-directed learning
- allows learners to take responsibility for their learning
- promotes the process of reflection by the learner.

This can be achieved by promoting activities that provide learners with the opportunity to think for themselves, to take responsibility, to work with others, and most importantly, to take risks and make mistakes within a supportive environment.

Providing opportunities for the development of generic skills

Empower the learner

Learning is most effective when the learner controls the experience. Individuals need the capacity to seek and use learning opportunities throughout their lives—to act creatively, to take risks and to make decisions.

Familiarise individuals with their preferred learning styles

To allow learners to develop generic skills, they need to be given opportunities to direct their own learning. One aspect of this is helping learners to identify their preferred learning style. This will make it easier for them to continue the learning process once the initial formal training is over.

Move out of the centre

Teachers need to relinquish some control in the classroom. They need to involve learners in making decisions about the types of learning they are involved in and planning their own projects or activities.

Experiential learning activities are ideally learner-led, managed or directed. They are teacher-supported. To become independent learners, individuals need to feel that the learning is their responsibility. This also means allowing learners to make mistakes and to make decisions that have consequences.

Encourage innovation

Being innovative does not necessarily involve coming up with earth shattering, radical new ideas. Nor does it have to involve inventing something brand new. It can be a process of building on and experimenting with existing ideas and processes.

Innovation is more and more a group activity. Brainstorming, combining the strengths of various group members, using the dynamics of the group to raise the level of creativity—are all valued strategies in the business arena and can be practised in and out of the training environment. Demystifying the innovation process and embedding it in learning activities is essential preparation for our future workforce.

Encourage learning from peers

The ability to access information and make sense of it by relating it to what is already known is the basis of all learning. Individuals process their experiences with the assistance of their friends and family every day. Strategies such as peer mentoring, coaching, buddy programs, group activities and teaching others a new skill are all successful because they acknowledge the effectiveness of learning from and with others. The participants assist one another to embed the knowledge.

Teach project management skills

Projects are multi-faceted and provide excellent opportunities for demonstrating and fostering a range of generic skills. Depending on the type of project, one or more generic skill might be predominant, such as communication or problem-solving, but normally projects involve a whole range of interrelated generic skills. Teaching project management skills provides learners with a clear understanding of all the processes involved such as planning the various tasks, managing time and having contingency plans in case difficulties arise.

Make the most of work experience or placement

There is undeniable value in gaining experience in a workplace environment, especially with regard to the development of generic skills. Guided reflection by a facilitator after the experience, especially in conjunction with peers who can share their range of experiences, can draw out this learning.

Recognise learner achievement

Recognising achievement in the area of work experience or study is important so that learners are taught to value generic skills. This can be done by awarding certificates, arranging presentation nights for learners, family, community members and helping the learner develop a personal portfolio.

Guide reflection

One of the most important steps in becoming independent learners is for the learners to recognise when they have achieved or learnt something valuable. Excellent exam marks or feedback from teachers and trainers is, of course, one way. However, it also comes

from the learner personally recognising and reflecting on something that they have learnt—through a positive or negative experience.

Effective articulation of one's generic skills comes with practice. The process of reflection needs to be taught and reinforced. It also needs to be explicitly valued in and outside of the learning environment.

This process can be carried out in a number of ways, depending on the learner and their learning style. While some learners may benefit from solitary thinking and reflecting on what they have learned or experienced during some 'quiet time,' others prefer a group discussion.

Model lifelong learning

Teachers/trainers are powerful role models. Sharing a passion for learning new skills and content will encourage trust in the relationship as both parties are involved in a learning journey. Articulation of the benefits gained from being an active learner, for example a more productive life or being first in line for a promotion, should be part of the trainer's approach when transferring their skills to the learner.

Conclusion

There is much to be done to change the traditional, teacher-centred approach to education and training to a more constructive pedagogy. The strategies outlined above will assist, but the change in culture will occur only when teachers/trainers reflect and recognise the importance of these skills, include them in learning programs and continually provide opportunities for learners to design and manage their learning, their personal lives and their employment opportunities. Equipping learners with generic skills is the best possible preparation for their futures.

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