

## Using students' part-time work as a context for identifying the application of academically acquired knowledge in the workplace

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**Abstract:** *In 2002, Griffith University undertook a strategic improvement initiative entitled the Workplace Learning Project to investigate ways of helping Arts students make explicit their full range of generic and transferable skills developed during their undergraduate degrees. Students used their existing part-time work as a context for reflecting on the value and transferability of the capacities acquired by them in Arts courses for use outside academia. The rationale for this research was that Arts students generally do not undertake a formal, structured work placement which, in conjunction with their university studies, prepares them for entry into a particular profession. However, a substantial number of these students nonetheless engage in part-time work, albeit often menial, but which may serve as an alternative to formal work placement in enabling Arts students to identify their actual and potential skills in preparation for graduate job seeking. This paper reports on the findings and outcomes of the study, which includes the introduction of a new course offered in the School of Arts, Media and Culture, called Learning and the Workplace.*

### Introduction

This research investigated the nexus between students' academic knowledge and its application in the part-time workplace given that these two arenas have traditionally remained relatively separate. Is the knowledge that students acquire in a university Arts course applied in any way in the work they find themselves engaged in while studying? If so, then to what extent can such work be considered as a form of internship for the world of work for an Arts student who has no other formal work placement? Such questions were at the core of the rationale for this project.

Much of the part-time work in which students engage while studying at university is considered menial bearing little relevance to Arts students' university studies or to their graduate employment. This work is traditionally within the hospitality or service industries. Yet Colin Symes (2000) argues that all forms of work are complex and multilayered, posing unique challenges.

In the past few years the nature of practice has been better understood as a result of the competency movement. The need to analyse the practices of work and to chart the nature of the competencies associated with them has uncovered the complexity of work and the degree to which skill is a multilayered phenomenon involving many mental and manual attributes. There is no work, be it of either the professional or the manual kind, which is "thoughtless" or which does not involve "handiwork". Any division between mental and manual work is groundless. (p.208)

If this is the case, then even supposedly menial work has the potential to provide a rich context in which students may analyse their performance and identify their capacities. Engagement in such an analysis can transform their understanding of the skills they have at their disposal in both academic and non-academic contexts. For this reason it is argued that students' part-time work can serve as an effective context for analysing and identifying their existing skills as well as providing them with the opportunity for developing facility with recontextualising generic skills acquired at university.

The paper will identify the range of knowledge and skills Arts students said they had acquired through their Arts courses as a precursor to the discussion about how students are transferring these skills into their part-time work context.

## Methodology

Data were gathered by interviewing 20 third year students. The hour-long interview was a combination of structured and unstructured approaches. Thus, while the core of the interview covered a number of predetermined questions, there was also opportunity for more open-ended discussion and generative questioning during the interview process designed to help students “unpack” responses that were likely to yield useful information. Thus, the research methodology was influenced by a number of considerations such as acknowledgment that students were being asked to think about associations and applications of their knowledge, which they may not have considered previously and therefore may need prompting or assistance in accessing and verbalising some of their tacit knowledge. Too highly structured an interview might not have sufficiently pressed students into unpacking their repertoire of transferable skills. The list of generic skills used for the interview is found below in Table 1.

**Table 1: List of generic graduate capacities used in the data gathering interview**

<b>Generic Graduate Capacities</b>	
<b>Cognitive</b>	Ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think critically (including the ability to critique existing paradigms i.e. question accepted wisdom);</li> <li>• Think creatively;</li> <li>• Think analytically;</li> <li>• Problem-solve (including identification and problem definition); and</li> <li>• Analyse and critically evaluate</li> </ul>
<b>Social</b>	Ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate effectively - in both oral and written form;</li> <li>• Work effectively and collaboratively as a member of a team;</li> <li>• Assume responsibility and make decisions;</li> <li>• Be sensitive to and appreciate differences in gender culture and customs; and</li> <li>• Value truth, accuracy, accountability and a code of practice</li> </ul>
<b>Personal/attitudinal</b>	Ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate and lead enterprises;</li> <li>• Commit to life-long learning;</li> <li>• Be self-reliant;</li> <li>• Be reflective; and</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage in self-assessment and analysis.</li> </ul>
<b>Technological</b>	<p>Ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use a wide range of technology (e.g. www and electronic databases) to locate, evaluate and manage information; and</li> <li>Be confident in the use of computers for various purposes and outcomes.</li> </ul>

### How are generic skills developed in students enrolled in Arts courses?

Students who participated in this study were able to identify specific courses and particular projects or assignments within courses which contributed to the development of various generic skills. Some subjects were identified as being particularly useful in developing transferable skills. For example, one student said that a first year communications course required her to undertake a project where she had to interview a variety of people and report on her findings. She chose to investigate the changes in university funding and how that resulted in increased fees to students. Although it was a challenging assignment for a first year student, it was particularly helpful to her in acquiring a range of skills in various dimensions such as critical thinking, problem solving, self-reliance and reflectiveness. The project gave her an insight into the way large organisational systems operate, which has served her well in her part-time work by enabling her to become aware of various workplace agendas and sources of conflict among different groups within her organisation.

Another student said that a particularly useful exercise in helping him to identify the range of generic skills acquired was to do a "skills map". This process was part of the subject *Arts Media, New Media* which required the students to identify what they could do and what they were good at and then use this understanding to undertake a project where they had to apply that knowledge. He also said that studying philosophy has improved his communication skills because of the need to "concretise" complex concepts so that they could be more easily understood. "In seminars you need to be able to provide a common example and be able to draw links".

Students consistently identified analytical and critical thinking as being the most targeted skill for development in Arts courses e.g. "In all the subjects I've done, critical thinking has been emphasised very heavily". A number of students had completed courses in literary and historical studies such as *Great Books* and *World History* which required them to examine ideas, concepts, contexts and events from various viewpoints as the following quotes illustrate:

In one exercise we did, we had to form into groups of four or five and take a chapter out of a book and analyse it - not go along with what was being said but to pull it apart, examine the theory and the philosophical assumptions.

Before doing my Historical studies I took everything on face value when researching. I never thought OK, this author could have an agenda. First year Arts really opened my eyes.

Arts students felt their problem solving skills were well developed because of the way in which they needed to approach assessment and assignment writing. They usually have to choose their own topics and decide on an approach and argument.

You need to identify what it is you want to discuss and what it is you want to argue. Even when they give you a question and say "do you agree or disagree and why" you still need to define the problem and define the argument.

The variety of presentations (seminars, tutorials, reports etc.) required in Arts courses, were identified by students as the primary vehicle for acquiring confidence in oral communication skills.

Oral presentations are mandatory in Arts subjects. When I did my first one four years ago, I was absolutely terrified. Now I've got no problems.

Yes you have to do the feared public speaking so you have to learn how to cope with that. But also to make people talk with you about it. I've had to do presentations where the idea was to get people to talk. So it helps you to learn how to create questions that get people talking, thinking and creating ideas.

Writing skills are targeted for development in all Arts courses. As one student put it "In every course I've been through they've stressed the art of essay writing. Lecturers want clear concise paragraphs, one leading into another in a logical fashion. And I'd say they do a pretty good job". In conjunction with this, correct referencing and acknowledgment of ideas and quotes is mandatory which develops within students a value for truth, accuracy, accountability and a code of practice. "So they're trying to instil an ethic, a professional ethic".

Students said that they were comfortable using a range of technology especially when it come to research skills and acquiring information from a diversity of sources.

I probably wouldn't be very good at using the internet or electronic databases if I hadn't done lots of research for assignments on them. And I'm very accustomed to Word. I would feel quite confident about going into any workplace and picking up on the technology.

The extent to which students are taught to engage in self reflection is dependent on their subject choices. Some courses were better at encouraging this process than others.

In my *Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives* course, the lecturer said on several occasions "you can't hope to learn anything new if you're not willing to learn things about yourself, to look at limits that you place on yourself and perhaps mindsets that you have that you need to get beyond".

This section shows that studying Arts provides students generally with a highly developed set of generic capacities as listed in Table 1. However, unless students are prompted to engage in some form of reflection (as they were for the interviews which provided this data) they may not realise the full range of their capacities. This was the rationale for introducing the new course *Learning and the Workplace*. The course presses students into extended and structured reflection helping them to explicitly identify and articulate their range of skills and the various ways in which they apply them. This aspect will be discussed further in the conclusion following an examination in the following section of how students use their academically acquired skills in their workplace.

### **The value of BA studies in the part-time workplace**

The cognitive capacities developed in Arts students are important in the workplace where flexibility is being increasingly valued by employers. One mature aged student, who had had prior workplace experience before coming to university, observed that Humanities courses actually provide experience in the kinds of thinking that emulate workplace thinking where solutions to problems are not clear cut with right or wrong answers. In Humanities courses, students gain facility in examining information from diverse points of view and in different contexts. "You have to consider different aspects and all

options...consider everything before you commit yourself, which is a good thing in employment as well". Thus Humanities students, as an integral part of their academic activity, are often pressed into recontextualising knowledge. This experience may in turn aid students in the recontextualisation of knowledge which must take place when they are in the workplace (Yashin-Shaw & Stevenson, in press).

Another mature age student who was self employed in his own furniture making business said that his business had improved since commencing his Arts degree because he was more adept at critical thinking, information gathering and decision making.

I've had to do some market research and that has involved research skills. I've had to use the internet. I've had to ring people and conduct oral interviews. I've had to question clients as to what they want and prefer and I'm very comfortable with all of that now after two years of practically spending the entire time in hunting down information.

Studying an arts degree gave students a much broader view of the world and this was applied in their workplace in a variety of ways e.g. one student said that a humanities student has always "got conversation" because of the broad knowledge base they have acquired through their studies. Consequently in this student's case she is able to facilitate workplace relationships by talking to people about what she knows they are interested in. Another participant observed:

It's that big thinking and it's not adopting one particular approach to something based on the particular theory you were taught, and not being locked into a particular way of looking at something. It's being more flexible and having the ability to appreciate that there are several different perspectives to something. It's the ability to question.

Students, in particular those who were Humanities majors, felt that they had acquired a good understanding into people's contexts, backgrounds and differences. Martha Nussbaum (1997) would argue that this insight and sensitivity has come from their study of literature which "... with it's ability to represent the specific circumstances and problems of people of many different sorts makes an especially rich contribution" (p.86). Students use this sensitivity to people in their part-time work in numerous ways. For example one student who worked as a check out supervisor in a supermarket said:

We have people bring food vouchers in. They're St Vincent de Paul vouchers and they often are fairly self-conscious of the fact that they're coming in with a food voucher. I've learnt to recognise these people and know that that's going to be an issue when they do come to the checkout because most of the time the checkout operator will just hold it up in the air. I mean they [the checkout operator] just don't think about that sort of thing. So I think, OK, I need to be sensitive to the fact that they're going to feel uncomfortable at the checkout if that happens.

It can be seen that students use their Arts knowledge and understanding in many different ways in their part-time jobs. Being aware of this and being able to identify and articulate how they do this is likely to help students feel more confident about their graduate job search.

## **Conclusion**

Despite a growing emphasis on transferable skills by employers, Leckey and McGuigan (1997) argue that higher education institutions are not taking up the challenge to develop these skills in students. This research suggests that this is not the full picture. Indeed the findings show that a liberal arts degree does develop in students knowledge, understanding and skills that are valuable in any workplace. However, students may not always realise their full range of skills and the ways in which they are operationalising them. This is because students are not pressed into explicitly identifying the full extent of

their capacities acquired at university and linking them to their work experience. Consequently such skills are often under acknowledged and under-utilised giving rise to the erroneous perception that a Bachelor of Arts does little to prepare students for graduate employment.

In relation to either the skills they were applying at work or the development of their generic capacities, students participating in the research often said "I never really thought about it until now" (or words to that effect). It wasn't until they had set time aside to reflect on their development or were aided in making the links during the interview, and then later in the course *Learning and the Workplace*, that they became fully aware of the range of skills that they had at their disposal. A formal opportunity for reflection such as that afforded by the interview process or participation in a course such as *Learning and the Workplace* which encouraged students to engage in the reflective cycle, will serve them well in their preparations for graduate job seeking. Also because students in the course engaged in this process over a period of time while still studying and working, they had the opportunity of making these links during the course of the semester which gave them more chance of identifying the full range of skills they had acquired. This process is further scaffolded by the assessment in the course, part of which requires them to write some journal entries and engage in extended reflection about the nature of the connections between their academic work and their other work. As Stephson (1998 cited in Marshall *et al*, 2001) points out, we need to "teach students skills for self-reflection since they are not automatic" (p.196). This was apparent in the interviews and tutorials when students were asked to identify application of their academic knowledge to their work. Students tended to resort to talking in generalities; however, if given time, and some help to think about more *specific* applications, were often able to produce them. It was simply that they had never thought about it before. Clearly, there is much to be gained by students in undertaking an extended exercise in reflection. Such an understanding will inevitably prove valuable in graduate job seeking.

## References

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