

## **GENERIC SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE FIRST YEAR: AN APPRAISAL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA STUDENTS**

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### **OUTLINE**

- Definitions & Examples of Generic Skills
- Generic Skills at University of Botswana
- Rationale for the Study
- Participants & instrument
- Results
- Discussions & Implications
- Suggestions for Further Research

### **GENERIC SKILLS: DEFINITIONS & EXAMPLES**

1. Any skills used over & over again (Geoff Petty, 2004)
2. Skills that apply across a variety of life contexts, e.g. education & jobs (NCVER 2003)
3. Qualities, skills, and abilities that are valued in study, social situations and employment (firstyear.chem.usyd.edu.au)

Examples : the UB graduate attributes below essentially exemplify generic skills.

### **UB Graduate Attributes:**

- Information and communication technology knowledge and skills
  - Self-directed, lifelong learning skills
  - Critical and creative thinking skills
  - Problem-solving skills
  - Communication skills
  - Entrepreneurship and employability skills
  - Organisational and teamwork skills
  - Research skills and information literacy
  - Social responsibility and leadership skills
  - Interpersonal skills
  - Cross-cultural fluency
  - Accountability and ethical standards
- (UB Learning & Teaching Policy, 2008, p.5)

### **GENERIC SKILLS: WHY IMPORTANT IN THE FIRST YEAR?**

- "The first year of the program for all disciplines is the common year in which students learn basic skills...." (Khoa & Tam, 2008:359)
- "As these are skills required in all spheres of life, their development at the earliest stage of education should be given the greatest encouragement." (The University of Western Australia, 1996:11)
- These skills relate both to the academic sphere & to the world of work (South African Council for Higher Education, 2004).

### **GENERIC SKILLS AT UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA**

- Professional /Training Workshops for lecturers
- UB Learning & Teaching Policy (approved in February 2008)
- Series of workshops are being organised to ensure successful implementation of L&T policy across all faculties and departments
- L&T Policy implementation now tied to performance management system, e.g. SECAT

### RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

- Widespread concern that schools are failing to impart the kinds of skills that employers need. (Botswana Guardian, 2007; Stasz, 2001)
- Follow-up on recent study of first year students' perspectives on the use of collaborative learning in an EAP course. (Brown, 2008)
- Establish a baseline for future research in generic skills at UB.
- Obtain feedback & raise awareness .

### PARTICIPANTS & INSTRUMENT

- 200 first year students in the faculties of Humanities, Science, Social Sciences, Business, and Education at the University of Botswana were randomly sampled.
- A questionnaire with 14 generic skills listed in two sections of the questionnaire (Adapted from The University of Western Australia, 1996) was administered.
- 192 questionnaires were analysed (97 females & 95 males) using mean & percentage .

### RESULTS

Which generic skills have the students developed through their content courses?

Most developed skills (mean scores):

- collect, analyse & organise info. (86.39)
- think and reason logically (82.18)
- work with minimum supervision (78.96)
- communicate in writing (78.66).

Least developed skills (mean scores):

- question accepted wisdom (57.36)
- communicate orally (65.07)
- be open to new ideas & possibilities (67.10)

### Results Cont'd

How important do the students consider each generic skill?

- **Most important skills** (mean scores):  
a) communicate in writing (98.85); b) think creatively (94.73)  
c) collect, analyse, and organise information (94.33)  
d) think and reason logically (94.21)  
e) adapt knowledge to new situations (91.71)  
f) be open to new ideas and possibilities (91.62)  
g) work in team (91.09); h) communicate orally (90.56)

### Results Cont'd

**Least important skill:** question accepted wisdom (78.18)

**When did students first become aware of generic skills?**

- First semester at UB : 52.1%
- Second semester at UB: 22.4%
- As a result of this study: 22.4%
- Before coming to UB: 3.1%

### Results Cont'd

What do students think their departments should do to enhance the development of generic skills?

- Some courses are more theoretical than practical. I wish the courses would combine the two.
- There should be full student participation in class to help us acquire confidence and high self-esteem.
- More group work to improve team work and decision making skills.
- More room for discussions.

### Cont'd

- Some assessments should be through group work where students are required to investigate some practical examples to theoretical topics.
- Oral presentations should be included so that students become confident talking to a large number of people.
- Include more group discussions on lecture topics instead of the lecturer coming to class and leaving without our contribution.
- Shift from emphasis on theory.

### Cont'd

- Students should be encouraged to participate in class even when they have wrong answers, as we know people learn from mistakes.
- We should be taught how to work effectively in teams and our studies made student based.
- Some topics should be debated in class to see the positive and negative points.
- We are completely excluded in courses like \*\*\*\* and \*\*\*\*. Lecturers just give notes without interaction with students. No short quizzes to test our level of understanding.

### Cont'd

#### SUMMARY

Students are calling for learner-centred instruction, e.g.

- Oral presentations
- Group/Class discussions and team work
- Interaction between students and lecturers

### DISCUSSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

- 22.4% of the first year students were not aware of generic skills until this study. Clearly, not enough has been done to raise students' awareness. That only 3.1 % knew about generic skills before coming to UB further suggests a lack of awareness.
- Students are calling for learner centred instruction. CL & PBL often offer opportunities for indirect & direct instruction in generic skills development.
- Need to integrate generic skills instruction in course syllabus regardless of discipline & year of study.

### Cont'd

- Set tasks that allow for skills practice, presentation skills & class discussions.
- Students' reported lack of sufficient development of oral communication skills & ability to question accepted wisdom = need for methodologies that allow students to learn by doing.
- Findings are very similar to those at The University of Western Australia. This, therefore, suggests that generic skills in L1 & L2 contexts may not be different.

### THE WAY FORWARD

- Change must be embraced.
- First year orientations should include more focus on generic skills – awareness, knowledge, & development.
- Mandatory incorporation of & explicit instruction in generic skills as part of content teaching in all disciplines.
- Our students have said that the classrooms are cold and need to be heated up. We are the facilitators and the ball is in our court.

## QUOTES

- “Titrations, which students often perform during their chemistry course, aren't only about volumetric analysis.”
- “You will probably find that your future employer will be more concerned with your generic skills than your knowledge of the third law of thermodynamics.”  
[www.firstyear.chem.usyd.edu.au](http://www.firstyear.chem.usyd.edu.au)

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

There is still much to be learned in the area of generic skill development and application in education, training, and workplace contexts.

Further research is suggested in the following areas:

- Implementation of L/T policy should be evaluated in the coming years & documented through research.
- All departments, years of study & gender may be explored to see whether they yield significant results.
- All final year students may be asked to rank their ability on the university's graduate attributes.
- Explore teachers and employers' perspectives on diverse aspects of generic skills.

## CLOSING

### QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Which skills apply in your subject ?
- Which skills would you like to see in your students?
- Which skills are you helping your students to develop?

## OTHER QUOTES

- “Few curricula will ever be totally subject-centred or totally learner-centred. However, even in institutions in which teachers and learners have minimal input into the curriculum development process, it is possible to introduce elements of learner-centred instruction.” Nunan, 2004:16
- “The only predictable certainty is that there will be change. That change will be both in substance and process and will embrace all our endeavours.”  
Vice-Chancellor, Prof. B. Otlhogile

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME