

Meeting the Challenge of Work and Life Using a Career Integrated Learning Approach

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Abstract

The Career Integrated Learning project is focused on encouraging students to articulate the graduating student attributes or competencies (GSC) they may gain through their university curriculum. Competencies that will help them ease their transition to the world of work or further graduate studies. Students develop those competencies through their experiences in the classroom, work based programs and community involvement. By identifying and articulating the broader skills and attributes acquired through completion of a degree, students can readily make a clear connection to the workplace. The concept of identifying GSC is not new, especially for students who participate in experiential learning activities. What is innovative about this project is translating the process to classroom-based courses, especially in Arts and Science faculties. This article describes the process of identifying competencies in collaboration with instructors and helping students reflect on those competencies as they complete courses.

Key Words: Teaching innovation; Career decisiveness; Liberal arts and sciences; Career integrated learning; Graduating attributes

Introduction

Upon graduation, students are expected to possess the knowledge and attributes to effectively make the transition to work and further graduate studies. Teaching and learning frameworks, such as the recent document published by Memorial University (2015), outline the attributes/competencies graduating students should possess in order to become successful workers and citizens of the 21st century. These attributes, career competencies or employment skills must be developed and articulated during post-secondary educational experiences in order for students to be successful in their transition to and through the labour market. Watts (2006) suggests that those skills contribute to 'sustainable employability', recognizing that students must be able to adapt in a changing labor market in order to succeed. Career Integrated Learning (CIL) is an innovative project developed at Memorial University, funded by the Counselling Foundation of Canada and focused on helping students recognize graduating student competencies that may be practiced in the classroom.

The concept of CIL is grounded in Patton and McMahon's (1999, 2014) systems theory framework and in Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984). The model of implementation was adapted from Career Development Learning as described by Smith et al. (2009). While students are learning subject content

(knowledge) they practice career competencies and develop skills, abilities and talents, and through reflection will learn to articulate those competencies that are relevant as they transition to and through the world of graduate studies or work.

Career Integrated Learning in the Classroom

To implement Career Integrated Learning in the classroom, individual consultations were held with faculty who the researchers felt might be interested in the project. The researchers began the pilot project with a few faculty and as the pilot project unfolded other faculty members were referred by other instructors.

Once an instructor agreed to participate in the project the course evaluation activities contained within the instructor's syllabus were analyzed for attributes and competencies that may be developed by students as they participate in class discussions, research academic topics, reflection in journals and through other evaluation methodology. While the researchers developed a list of possible competencies for faculty members for this project. The Career Development and Experiential Learning Centre at Memorial University also proved to be a valuable resource for faculty members who wanted to develop a list of transferable attributes/competencies for their course. These competencies were agreed upon by the faculty member and then the finalized list of competences was included either next to each evaluation activity in the syllabus or on a separate sheet and reviewed with students within the first week of classes. For the project a member of the research team visited the faculty member's classroom in the first week of classes. At midterm and then the final week. The purpose of each visit was to introduce the topic in the first week, gauge student interest and support student reflection at midterm and in the final week elicit feedback on how students felt about the process and any knowledge gained. It was critical to emphasize to the faculty member that participation in this project would not alter the course content in any way. Hence, academic freedom was not impinged in any way. While the course content and evaluation scheme remained the same the addition of the competencies enabled students to become more aware of the transferrable skills that may be obtained while completing the course.

Many resources were utilized in the creation of GSC (Watts, 1977; Atlay & Harris, 2000; Conference Board of Canada, 2000; Yorke & Knight, 2004; Rees, Forbes, & Kubler, 2006). For example, many university courses include group assignments. A syllabus may state that 'students are expected to form small groups and present to the class on a theory. The group will have 60 minutes to present and as part of a presentation there should be an experiential component/role play/ or demonstration'. As students complete this assignment they learn to understand the dynamics of groups, especially in relation to leadership and supporting roles as well as division of work tasks and responsibility of members to the entire team. In completing an assignment with a presentation, they learn to apply research or knowledge to practice, demonstrate creativity, develop presentation skills, and do all this within a series of timeframes appropriate to meet the needs of the group and the date assigned by the instructor for the presentation. Many of these skills are mimicked in the workplace: collaborating with others, working as a member of a team, learning to present ideas to an audience (either formally or informally), applying knowledge to practice and working to meet deadlines.

As Kolb's model demonstrates, reflection plays a critical role in learning. The approach to reflection within Career Integrated Learning is two-fold. Initially reflection is focused on identifying what is learned through this process. In the example above, students may identify that they learned to meet deadlines in three different sets of circumstances: within the group setting providing input and assembling a presentation; as a team to meet the deadline for presentation and again within a group to assure that each member had an appropriate role for a 60-minute presentation. The second part of the reflection focused on "what now". Once the student has experienced giving a presentation, then the focus shifts

to reflecting on their own evaluation of both their mastery of and individual need for the competency. Is it something they want or need to hone for a desired occupation—teaching, for example, or marketing ideas? Is it something that they prefer not to do, but recognize that it may be necessary 'sometimes' in the workplace. At this stage students begin to focus on skills they need to practice. Students may choose courses to build on competencies and instructors might promote courses by focusing on competencies gained.

In over 450 surveys delivered in classrooms during 2013 and 2014, seventy-two percent of students indicated that they found the identification of GSC helpful. Many students offered comments on the value of being introduced to graduating student competencies learned through class activities. The following quotes are taken from surveys administered to students in the classroom after reflection on the graduating student competencies they may have practiced in a course:

"Becoming aware of my GSC's has become so beneficial to me as it has given me the knowledge and confidence to understand what skills and competencies I have and how these can help me grow and develop. I feel confident that I have a greater understanding of who I am, where I want to go, and how I am going to get there."

"I received three job offers after handing [employers] my resume... all of them commented that my listed skills peaked their interest.... I never would have thought that critical thinking was a skill."

"I have definitely been thinking about the interviewing and writing skills I have learned. As a folklore major these skills will certainly be used in future courses when I have to conduct primary research."

Summary

In addition to classroom visits, recently the project has expanded its reach to employers and the community in an effort to extend the career conversation between students and the community. Understanding the need for these essential skills—and the role that educational institutions, students and employers need to play—is important in bridging the gap between school and work.

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