

# Separate or Integrate? The Contribution of the Workshop Model to Effectively Embedding Generic Skills

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## Abstract

A major question for the generic skills project (Graduate Skills, 2010) was how best to promote the development of these skills for students in business. This question has preoccupied educationalists for decades and a variety of strategies are currently in use. This paper reviews the literature in the area and proposes an additional approach to the development of generic skills – the use of intensive workshops. Beginning with students and later incorporating teaching staff, a series of one- to three-day workshops were held at various universities around Australia. These were well received by both the students and academics who participated. Student feedback from the workshops showed they had improved their understanding of the four generic skills discussed – critical thinking, teamwork, sustainability and ethical practice – and had especially enjoyed learning in a socially interactive and challenging environment. These results suggest that the workshop model has considerable potential either in stand-alone form or as a complement to an existing strategy for generic skills development.

**Keywords:** Generic skills, Embedding, Workshop model

## 1. Introduction

One of the key questions addressed by this project – “Embedding, developing and grading generic skills in business curricula” [EDGGS] (Vu, Rigby, & Mather, 2011) – was how to effectively embed generic skills in the curriculum. A review of the literature reveals that while the importance of generic skills is widely acknowledged and discussed there is no general consensus about how best to develop students’ proficiency with these skills. This lack of consensus stems, to a large degree, from differences in understandings about what the term “generic skills” actually means and what is entailed in their development. These differences have been noted individually, among and between academic and employer groups (Al-Mahmood & Gruba, 2007; Barrie, 2004; Leveson, 2000; Marginson, 1993) and institutionally in the plethora of approaches to generic skills development adopted by

Australian universities. In recent years attempts to clarify the situation have seen a shift in research focus from mapping and describing generic skills to one which investigates how these skills are acquired and developed and the teaching and learning strategies employed in the process (Hoban *et al.*, 2004; Bowden *et al.*, 2000).

This paper describes one strategy in particular: the use of specially designed workshops aimed at enhancing generic skills development among students in the expectation that the proficiency gained will serve to underpin and inform their subsequent learning. Although it has received very little research attention to date, we believe that the workshop model has the potential to act as a powerful complement or perhaps a substitute for existing models of generic skills development.

Three of the most widely discussed models of delivery are labeled embedded, dedicated and infused. Of these, the embedded approach appears to be the most popular. This is because it involves subject teachers in generic skills as well as their discipline; it relates these skills to a subject context (considered as educationally sound); and it increases student perceptions of their importance (Al-Mahmood & Gruba, 2007; McDonald, 2004; Molyneux, 2004; Bowden *et al.*, 2000). However, this approach is also resource intensive as it often requires an overhaul of the curriculum as well as staff induction and training (McDonald, 2004).

These issues are less problematic with the dedicated approach as the program is designed and delivered within stand-alone units by specialist staff. Done expertly, this approach creates a strong sense of social cohesion or community among staff and students. A social context has been shown to encourage a better understanding of principles as it facilitates greater discussion including self-explanation, an important meta-cognitive skill (Atkinson *et al.*, 2000). This, in turn, facilitates the transfer of generic skills to the work context (Billing, 2007). As one of the key aims of a generic skills education is to equip graduates with employment-ready skills, this represents a key strength of this approach. However, dedicated generic skills subjects are often perceived as a “soft” “add-on” by some subject staff and students, which can not only detract from their effectiveness but can create a communication barrier between subject and specialist staff as well.

Al-Mahmood and Gruba (2007) also describe an infused model which appears to be a combination between the two. Here generic skills development is covered in separate modules/lectures within each subject. They consider that this “infusion” can be catered for by specialist staff on an “as required” basis throughout the course and that their input may inject new energy into existing subjects. However, they also point out that this may jeopardize the sense of continuity within both the curriculum and the teaching program.

## **2. Approaches to generic skills development among Australian Universities**

The wide range of understandings in the literature appears to be reflected in the variety of approaches to generic skills development articulated by Australian universities. An internet-based survey of courses and units offered in 35 business programs across Australia (undertaken at the beginning of the EDGGS project) revealed that while universities have broad statements about the development of a range of generic skills and competencies among their students, it is difficult to generalize about the modes of delivery used to develop these skills in practice. The reasons for this relate to both language and structure. To begin with, although some labels are more favored than others, there is no definitive common language between universities. Additionally, some business and related courses use a sequence of separate units, others an introductory unit focused on generic skills, and yet others rely on the development of these skills within the disciplinary context. Many universities have specific units covering topics such as business ethics and sustainability which address some of the core competencies covered in most university generic skills statements.

For these reasons it proved difficult to make a comprehensive survey of the way generic skills are developed in each Australian university, since universities have different degree structures and it is not always clear from the course and unit descriptions what the intended learning outcomes are.

In some universities, such as Edith Cowan University (ECU), there is a sequence of separate units which are the focus of generic skill development. At ECU the Business Edge program includes four compulsory units, two in first year and one in each subsequent year, which aim to develop the broad skills – such as critical thinking and teamwork – necessary for a successful career in business. The content is developed by appropriate expert staff with input from discipline specialists.

In other universities, courses are designed to include units with generic skill development outside the core area of study. At Charles Darwin University, there is a compulsory introductory unit developing critical thinking, academic reading and writing, and information and computer literacy skills. Following an extensive revision of the curriculum, the University of Tasmania has introduced a compulsory business communication unit covering academic literacy and referencing for Bachelor of Business undergraduates. Macquarie University aims to

broaden their students' skills by requiring all students to study units outside their core study area: students must select one unit from the list of People units and one from the Planet list.

Another common option for developing these skills is to incorporate them in specific first year units. "Introduction to Management", for example, is a unit which is sometimes used as the vehicle for the development of generic skills (for example at the University of Canberra, Latrobe University, Murdoch University and the University of South Australia). At other universities – including the University of Western Sydney, the University of Tasmania and the University of Wollongong – the development of critical thinking, communication and teamwork skills are listed among the learning outcomes of their capstone units.

It was possible to identify units in some degree programs which were directed specifically towards developing each of the four graduate attributes which were the focus of the EDGGS project. The most common stand-alone unit was a business ethics unit which was found at most of the universities surveyed. At some universities there were units specifically examining issues relating to sustainability, including corporate sustainability (see for example the Australian National University, Charles Stuart University, Griffith University, Southern Cross University, the University of Southern Queensland, and Swinburne University). Units explicitly focused on critical thinking were available at the University of New South Wales and the Australian Catholic University. Explicit units aimed at developing teamwork capabilities were less frequent, but there was one example at the University of Queensland.

In summary, we tentatively conclude from the results of the survey that the most common approach to generic skills development was aligned with the embedded model although there were some notable exceptions. Our discussions with project members and other members of the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Teaching and Learning Network indicate that grappling with the development of generic skills is an evolving and ongoing process. The commitment to promoting these skills is not uniform among academics, with some arguing that it is not their responsibility and that it is outside the scope of their expertise. The problem of accommodating this extra component in an already crowded curriculum remains significant. Rigby *et al.* (2009) noted in a review of the literature that, although there was a shared rhetoric about generic skills within normative frameworks, there was no consensus on effective strategies for how they can be fostered and developed. Barrie (2004) has previously commented that, "the experiences of authors reporting in the literature on initiatives to foster the development of such attributes ... would suggest the need to question the extent to which this rhetoric does reflect a shared understanding." (p. 263)

Given this uncertainty at both a theoretical and practical level, the project team was interested in exploring new ways of developing strategies for further generic skills development. In addition to examining the literature and existing practice in Australian universities, the project added a novel source of information, namely analyzing student feedback from an intensive workshop on generic skills.

### **3. Description of initial and later workshops**

There is a lack of discussion in the generic skills literature of the student experience or student perceptions with respect to the development of generic skills, yet the benefits of obtaining insights into the learning process in general from a student point of view are well documented (Leveson, 2004; Trigwell & Prosser, 1999; Marton & Säljö, 1976). An intensive workshop model was therefore developed for this project to gauge student response to a series of case studies with business ethics and sustainability themes using teamwork and critical thinking processes. The case studies and teaching strategies were developed specifically to obtain feedback on student understanding of generic skills and the best ways of developing them.

Students with a credit average or better from the seven participating universities were invited to attend a three-day workshop at Macquarie University in Sydney. Our sample therefore included more academically capable and motivated students. Approximately five third-year representatives from each of the participating universities accompanied by an academic staff member attended. In all, 35 students were involved. After initial "getting-to-know-you" exercises, short introductory sessions on each of the four skills areas (critical thinking, teamwork, sustainability, ethical practice) were presented including "mini-lectures" and exercises. For example, after a short introduction to critical thinking, students were given an article to analyze in groups of five and a general discussion brought the groups together at the end of the session.

On the second day of the workshop, the students were given an exercise about the proposed Gunns pulp mill in the Tamar Valley in Tasmania with each member of each group of five being given a stakeholder group to represent: the Gunns shareholders, the government, the local community, the workers and the conservationists (see also Wood & Dixon, in this Issue). They were given a general information sheet and one specific to their stakeholder group. Following the jigsaw method, the stakeholder groups came together to discuss their

arguments on the proposed mill and then went back to their original groups to develop a consensus for or against building the pulp mill. At the end of the session there was a general discussion among all participants on the issues raised by the proposed pulp mill and the process by which each group had reached some consensus among the different stakeholders. This included a discussion of the role of personalities within each group, the ethical dilemmas involved in the decision about the future of the pulp mill, and the logical development of the arguments presented.

This session was followed by one in which students had the opportunity to use some of the skills they had been introduced to earlier. Students were allocated to groups of five from different universities and each of the seven groups were given a different exercise to examine and prepare for the final day. The exercises were current examples of ethical dilemmas that were relevant to business students: for example, bailing out the banks in the Global Financial Crisis; building a water desalination plant; drug testing of employees; and monitoring of employee e-mails. The three-day event culminated in a series of group presentations where each group received feedback from other students, staff and selected business representatives.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 For students

At the conclusion of the workshop, students were invited to comment (via video, tape and focus group interview) on their experience and what they had learned about generic skills. They talked about how their workshop experience compared with their experience in their home institution, and how these skills were developed in their courses. The participants were followed up three months later for further reflections on their experience. The student comments about the workshop experience were overwhelmingly positive: a minority felt that the workshop reinforced what they knew already, but the majority were able to articulate benefits related to the following themes.

#### 4.1.1 Academic benefit

The main academic benefits appear to be a heightened awareness of the nature of the four generic skills; their capacity as students to shape their learning experience; and the opportunity to learn from other people.

*So yeah for that degree they [the generic skills] are essential to successfully doing a degree and then getting into the workforce ... that was definitely something that I discovered while I was at the workshop, if only because you've never thought of it prior to that ... when you're doing an assignment, a group assignment, you don't sit there and go, how can I get this team to work more effectively, whereas the workshop pointed out that you'd probably benefit more if you do get your team working effectively. I hadn't really even thought of the skills themselves until I actually attended the workshop.*

*I guess one of the things was sometimes we wouldn't set out exactly what people were going to be responsible for. Whereas in the workshop we set that out and then when I went back to university we used that quite clearly rather than people saying, oh I thought you were going to do that. It was really clear what people were responsible for.*

#### 4.1.2 Personal development

For many students the workshop appeared to engender a reflective attitude towards aspects of their personal life.

*I think it [the workshop] has given me more confidence with myself, especially in reducing self-doubt, and it's also helped me in terms of looking in the long term and challenging myself to ask the big questions in life, in terms of what do I want to do with my degree which will not only stimulate my critical thinking but is also looking at how I can help both ethically and in a sustainable manner, as well as understanding, evaluating my own strengths and weaknesses in order to provide the very best to the table as a team player.*

#### 4.1.3 Social context

The students were particularly positive about the socialization exercise and the social context for learning. Research suggests that a social context for learning facilitates a more effective transfer of skills learned to other contexts as it encourages students to use their meta-cognitive capabilities (Billing, 2007).

*In the workshop we have a lot of participations [sic]. Like, we have many students from many different universities around Australia. In the workshop you kind of exchange idea and exchange our opinion. So it is more really more general and more critical then what I do out in my unit. So I think without the workshop I would not have that general and broad knowledge of ethics and sustainability.*

*Everyone has different views ... So not just to take mine as the one and only view out there, like to listen to*

*what other students have to say. At the workshop we found out like a lot of people are very different and what they believe and what they believe is right and wrong and stuff like that.*

#### 4.1.4 Transferability to employment

Some students were particularly aware of the usefulness of the skills learned in the workshop to their current employment or to their post-workshop search for employment.

*The teamwork section of the workshop – that definitely helped. Because I was applying graduate positions and so when I went into an interview I was more aware of what sort of skills that the employers were looking for that was ideal for the workplace. How you would deal with problems within the team and how you work in a team. The sort of skills, for example allocating the tasks according to different skills and expertise. How you support the different members. I applied all of those, that knowledge and understanding to my interview so that's how I structured my responses.*

*The thing that I got most out of that workshop I think is because it was around the time I was just about to go for interviews and go to assessment centers and things for graduate jobs, it really helped with my confidence for that.*

*Because from the workshop I learnt – they kind of told us what employees are looking for so I kind of took away from that that I need to do more than just my degree and I need to get out there and do other activities. So I joined different groups at uni[versity] so hopefully on my resume employers will see that and think that's an initiative to learning new skills.*

#### 4.1.5 Transferability to other cultures

Interestingly, many of the international students commented on how profoundly affected they were by the experience of the workshop, mainly because it appears to stand in sharp contrast to the learning experience in their home country.

*[We] get to meet more people from different countries. It's really a good way to be networking as well. The topic in the workshop that we discuss were very interesting and as I said it really different from what I experienced in my country and in my life experience so I think international student are very keen on knowing and discussing all this kind of thing.*

*I think where we learn in China, the majority is based on, you know we don't have a lot of workshops like, workshops like that the junior professionals or the current. We pretty much, we have lectures so it's different. Nothing involves a lot of activities. So I think if you involve a lot of activities and students participate in what's going on and contribute to the workshop, that's a very good way of learning.*

*The character and aptitude and personality in specific in my culture are very different from Australian culture and sometimes I really have to be very struggle in my interview because in Australia they have some kind of social and brave attitude. Where, in my country we are more, we are not that open and we are shy and I really found that a limitation in a job interview process.*

The feedback from the students and the academic staff involved in the workshop was overwhelmingly positive, so it was decided to hold three additional workshops to further test the workshop method and to encourage the dissemination of the project results. The experiential approach had proved valuable as a way of communicating these skills to students. In addition, it offered the prospect of involving more academic staff in the workshop process both as “students” and as potential users of both the material developed and the workshop model as a mode of delivery. Three additional workshops based on the Macquarie model were held – one in Brisbane involving both students and academic staff from 13 institutions; one at Macquarie University for selected students; and one in Melbourne for academics from six Victorian universities (for further details see [www.graduateskills.edu.au](http://www.graduateskills.edu.au)). Additionally, the case studies were incorporated into existing units at several universities involved with the project, and participating students and academics were also asked to give us feedback.

#### 4.2 For academic staff

From a teaching perspective it was important to develop resources which were relevant, stimulating and challenging. Those resources developed for and used in the workshop provided a solid base for a high-quality educational experience for staff as well as students. After the inaugural workshop these were refined and expanded and formed the core of the materials now available on the Graduate Skills website ([www.graduateskills.edu.au](http://www.graduateskills.edu.au)) for general use. Feedback from the various workshops suggested that academics were eager to obtain resources that were of immediate use and which helped to tackle some of the more difficult

areas of teaching such as: resolving difficulties in teamwork (contracts); identifying comprehensive and relevant criteria for assessment (Standards rubrics); and using resources that were equally applicable for local and international students (generic case studies).

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

One of the key concerns of the EDGGS project was to address the question of how to develop students' proficiency with four important generic skills in an educationally efficacious manner. There has been an ongoing debate as to the best way of achieving this and many models are in existence. The most common include the development of these skills in dedicated subjects, or integrated into existing units, or a combination of the two approaches (infused). The workshop model presented here offers an additional method for developing generic skills which can be used to complement other modes of delivery. Workshops can be used to "kick-start" students' awareness and understanding of the relevance of these skills to their future employment. They can also be used as a means for consolidating understanding at the end of an undergraduate course.

One feature of this model which impressed the project team was how enthusiastically the experience was received by the students and academic staff involved. This appears to reflect the advantages to students of learning in a socially conducive context (Billing, 2007). Judging by the student and staff responses, the workshops increased participants' awareness and understanding of the generic skills through discussion and practice by way of up-to-date case studies relevant to the business context. The success of the workshops depended very much on the quality of resources and their organization and conduct.

As it differed from the traditional lecture-tutorial format, the workshop format represented a relatively novel learning experience for these students, and it clearly worked well for the group of highly motivated students who attended. Some of the case studies have also been trialed successfully in a one-off way in existing units at universities participating in the project, but we are unsure whether the same degree of success would be achieved in an extended workshop with other student groups who were less motivated and less academically successful. The model needs further testing in a range of contexts to further clarify where it is likely to be most useful.

The workshop model has the limitation of being resource intensive in terms of both initially setting up a workshop program and in keeping the case study material up-to-date. The material on the project website offers some short cuts to establishing a workshop. The case studies have been developed so that they can be adapted for use in a lecture-seminar-tutorial setting. Many of the case studies presented on the website will remain applicable with minor modifications in the foreseeable future; some others may become out of date. In addition, the website material has a business focus and it may be necessary to develop other examples relevant to other disciplines.

Although the material can be adapted for use with different class sizes, for example by using tutorial time to introduce these concepts in large classes, it is likely to be difficult to develop a two or three-day workshop for a large group of students. Practical difficulties including timetabling such workshops are likely to compound the pressure on resources. While it may not be possible to run a full-scale workshop, it would be possible to adapt parts of the program for inclusion in either an embedded, dedicated or infused model of generic skill development.

The workshop model has the potential to be:

- A flexible and adaptable method of developing generic skills.
- A method to highlight the importance and relevance of generic skills for students.
- A mechanism for involving and engaging academic staff who would normally be either disinterested or unaware of the important role of a generic skills capability among students.
- A means of introducing generic skills to students in a curriculum which is already crowded and with limited opportunities for developing these skills.
- A means for providing opportunities for students lacking a strong academic background to begin to develop these skills before the commencement of the academic year.
- Adapted for a variety of students and situations. Just as the original workshop focused on refining the generic skills capability of high-achieving students, the model can be adapted for students who are less proficient in this area, or who are less aware of the cultural and social milieu governing those skills deemed to be desirable. Here students from non-English speaking backgrounds, from the non-university education sector and returning mature-aged students come to mind.

While the workshop model is unlikely to replace alternative modes for developing generic skills, it has the potential to offer an interesting complement to these other modes of delivery.

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