

Generic skills

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Introduction

Put simply, *generic skills*¹ are those that apply across a variety of jobs and life contexts. They are also known by several other names, including key skills, core skills, essential skills, key competencies, necessary skills, transferable skills and employability skills. (NCVER², 2003) There is a high demand for generic skills in the workplace. Employers seek to ensure business success by recruiting and retaining employees who have a variety of skills and personal attributes as well as technical skills. Individuals also need a range of generic skills to form and maintain family and community relationships (ibid.)

Generic skills are important because jobs today require flexibility, initiative and the ability to undertake many different tasks. They are not as narrowly prescribed and defined as in the past and generally they are more service oriented, making information and social skills increasingly important. Employers now focus on adaptation, cost reduction, increased productivity, and new markets, products and services. Employees need to demonstrate teamwork, problem-solving, and the capacity to deal with non-routine processes. They should also be able to make decisions, take responsibility and communicate effectively. Proficiency in the broad range of generic skills has become the main requirement for the modern worker (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002).

Generic skills include metacognition and metacognitive skills.

Generic skills

There is no definitive list of generic skills. Instead, there are a number of lists. Collectively, the lists have six common elements:

- Basic/fundamental skills – such as literacy, using numbers, using technology;
- People-related skills – such as communication, interpersonal skills, teamwork, customer-service skills;
- Conceptual/thinking skills – such as collecting and organising information, problem-solving, planning and organising, learning-to-learn skills, thinking innovatively and creatively, systems thinking (please note that this includes *metacognitive skills*. Mak, 2005).
- Personal skills and attributes – such as being responsible, resourceful, flexible, able to manage own time, having self-esteem;
- Skills related to the business world – such as innovation skills, enterprise skills;
- Skills related to the community – such as civic or citizenship skills. (NCVER, 2003)

The list of generic skills³ that Paton (1996) uses in his *Generic skills survey* includes the ability to:

- communicate orally;
- communicate in writing;
- learn new skills & procedures;
- work in a team;
- make decisions;
- solve problems;
- adapt knowledge to new situations;
- work with minimum supervision;
- understand the ethics & social/cultural implications of decisions;
- question accepted wisdom;
- be open to new ideas and possibilities;
- think and reason logically;

¹ Terms in *italics* are included in the glossary.

² NCVER: National Center for Vocational Education Research, Australia's principle provider of vocational education and training research and statistics

³ Griffith University, Brisbane, defines generic skills in a different way and uses the following list: oral communication, written communication, problem-solving, analysis, critical evaluation, information literacy, teamwork. See Griffith University website: www.gu.edu.au/centre/gihe/griffith_graduate.

- think creatively;
- analyse;
- make mature judgement & take responsibility in moral, social & practical matters.

Each sector of education – schools, vocational education and training, higher education and adult and community education – has a role to play in helping people to develop their generic skills. These skills are developed throughout a person's life and in multiple settings including work and life settings and educational settings. (NCVER, 2003)

The acquisition of generic skills

According to the Instructional-Design Theories Site (1999), a generic skill is a skill which:

- can be applied across a variety of subject domains, and
- takes longer to acquire than domain-dependent (subject-area) skills.

A generic skill differs from a domain-dependent skill in that it is applied across different content domains and it takes longer to learn. Both of these differences have important influences on how a generic skill is learned.

The fact that it is applied in different content domains means that it can only be learned through application to domain-dependent knowledge. Therefore, you must decide what domain-dependent content to use for teaching the generic skill at each point in your instructional sequence. Secondly, if we want the learners to be able to apply it in different content domains, they need to learn to generalize it to different content domains.

The fact that it takes longer to learn means that the order of learning becomes an important issue. An example is learning problem solving. You don't learn how to deal with the most complex cases all at once but probably start by learning problem-solving techniques that enable you to solve very simple kinds of problems. (Instructional-Design Theories Site, 1999)

Perhaps the first issue to address is how to sequence the instruction. Based on the principle of learning presented in the previous section, we should use an elaboration sequence rather than a hierarchical sequence. We should figure out what the simplest kind of case is, and teach it to mastery, complete with all the procedures, principles, and other content needed to learn it. Then we should figure out what the next simplest kind of case is, and do the same. A certain kind of task analysis is necessary to do this, and it will result in an outline of the sequence of levels of complexity of the generic skill (ibid.).

Generic skills and the *animateur*

When defining the qualities of the *animateur* in terms of skills, intelligences and competencies, there are 'explicit knowledge and skills (for example, the ability to work as a member of a team; to monitor resources; to evaluate a programme against agreed criteria) and implicit (or tacit) skills and knowledge (implicit or tacit understandings and qualities, i.e. those which depend on intuition, values, ethos and motivation and which are not easy to define or benchmark.' (Animarts, 2003)

Generic skills are often directly related to *tacit knowledge*: 'Knowledge (that) can be codified, i.e. described in terms of formulae, blueprints, and rules (and) knowledge that cannot easily be codified, often termed tacit, is (...) more difficult to acquire since it can only be transferred effectively by experience and face-to-face interactions.' (ibid.)

Generic skills can be recognised when describing the *implicit knowledge* of the animateur:

- Recognition, acknowledging the participants as individuals; the animateur brings an open and unprejudiced attitude;
- Negotiation, consulting the participants about their preferences;
- Collaboration, working together to achieve a definite aim;
- Abstention, the animateur deliberately abstains from using his/her power;
- Play, the animateur is prepared to play and engage in an experience which involves exercising spontaneity and self-expression which has value itself;
- Celebration, where boundaries of ego become diffuse;
- Relaxation, moments of respite for body and mind during the process;
- Validation, accepting the power and reality of participants' experience and hence its 'subjective truth';
- Empathy, with participants;
- Holding, creating safety (able to tolerate and deal with disturbing emotions);
- Facilitation, responding unprejudiced to participants' contributions;
- Creation, finding a place for his/her own artistic intentions and language, whilst acknowledging participants' abilities, ideas and responds to them without taking control (ibid.).

Literature references

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