

Students' Perceptions of the most Important Sources that have Developed the Awareness of the Importance of Generic Competencies

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Abstract

This paper aimed to explore the effectiveness of the cooperative education programmes, in developing students' awareness of the importance of generic competencies required for IPA's Post-secondary Diploma degree Graduate entering the workplace (Bajunaid, 2008). This work was to identify students' perceptions of the most important sources developed students' awareness of the importance of generic competencies, and the rank of Co-operative education programme among them.

The study showed that Post-secondary Programme (PSP) was ranked in first place as the most important source that developed students' awareness of the importance of competencies, whether in an individual area or under the two categories hard and soft. Second was home/family/community, third came the Co-op Programme, fourth was school, and self-taught came in the last rank

Keywords: Co-operative education, Generic competencies,

Introduction

Fitzgerald (1985) (as cited in Harrison, 1986) has cited two studies to illustrate the distinction between traditional and alternative learning environments. One of these studies conducted at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education and the other at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). Utilizing surveys of the general public, teachers, students, and employers, the National Center study asked about the source of learning for four competency skill groups: traditional job values and expectations, job advancement and promotion, taking charge, and finding one's place. All surveyed groups believed that all these competencies were learned on the job, although they did not agree that this should necessarily be so. Fitzgerald comments on the problem this finding creates, particularly for minority youth who cannot get hired because they lack employability skills and do not learn employability skills until they have a job.

The NWREL study examined the concept of youth responsibility. Questions attempted to define what it is, where it is learned, and how it is demonstrated. Students said they learned responsibility at home, at work, and at school, in that order. However, they felt they behaved most

responsibly at work and least responsibly at school.

The common thread running through the research indicates that the workplace is the site of most learning concerning work. The implication is that since traditional classroom instruction has not produced the desired outcomes, alternatives should be considered. Fitzgerald (1985) suggests the possibility of using experience-based career education as one such alternative. This method is possibly more effective because of its close ties to the workplace and its emphasis on the "real world". Fitzgerald calls for more research in this area to multiply and improve the alternatives.

Joseph and Joseph (1997) (as cited in Hodges & Burchell, 2003) reported that employers believe that educational institutions provide relevant employment experience for their business students, but remarkably, ascribe generic competencies a low level of importance. However, the level of competency expected of graduates by these employers, fell well below their perceived level of importance, suggesting that employers expected these competencies would be developed elsewhere in the curriculum and not necessarily through industry involvement. Raymond, McNabb and Matthaei (1993), in a survey of teaching methods to develop

competencies for the workplace, found both employers and students ranked Co-operative education as the most important educational method, and pointed to a critical need for student thinking and ability to learn.

Harrison (1986) gives school a big responsibility in developing students' employability opportunities. He asserted that general employability skills must be taught at school thoughtfully, both through words and actions. Harrison placed much emphasis to the example. He says: "teacher who is habitually late to class is teaching students that punctuality is not important". (p. 3)

Harrison has mentioned that home also can play integrated role with school to enhance students' responsibility.

Methodology

The populations used for this study consisted of IPA's Post-secondary students in Dammam brunch (N=99). Students (after participating in Co-op) were asked in the questionnaire – to rank the most important sources that developed their awareness of the importance of competencies from the following five sources: Co-op, Post-secondary Programme (PSP), Home/family/community, School, and Self-taught. By using a variance stable scaling program called RANKO, which presents the data as ranks in reverse order, 1 is giving for the most important source and 5 for the least (Peter et al., 2004).

31 competencies were used based on the 20 generic competencies identified by Spencer & Spencer (1993) who claims that account for 80-95% of the distinguishing features of superior performers with other 6 competencies selected from literature (Meade & Andrews, 1995; Sweeney & Twomey, 1997; Rainsbury, Hodges, Burchell & Lay, 2002, Hodges & Buchell, 2003). The following further five competencies were added by the researcher: English language (overall), English language (Writing), English language (speaking), Attendance and Timekeeping, and Confidentiality at work. English language is considered important in the workplace in Saudi Arabia today, specially in the private sector. It has become the language of most majors in higher education. Therefore, there was more emphasis on English language, particularly (writing) by many companies as one of most important competencies required for hiring employees. English courses providing for the IPA's Post-secondary students in the first year for two full semesters and focus initially on

general English, involving the skills of oral communication, reading, writing, and listening. Attendance and timekeeping, confidentiality at work, are two work ethical competencies that were added to the suggested competencies' list as important values that considered as essential factors of high performance and quality (Lin, 2005).

The researcher has conducted 'Direct Ranking' by using a variance stable scaling programme called RANKO. RANKO presents the data as ranks in reverse order (Peter et al., 2004).

Results and Discussion

As it shown in Table 1, Students after participating in the Co-op have ranked the most important sources in developing their awareness of the importance of competencies as the following:

Post-secondary Programme (PSP) came first. It scored the first place in 17 competencies. These competencies were the following five hard competencies: analytical thinking, conceptual thinking, technical expertise, computer literacy, written communication. The other twelve were the following soft competencies: English language (overall), English language (writing), English language (speaking), information seeking, ability and willingness to learn, impact and influence on others, organisational awareness, developing others, directiveness, team leadership, attendance and timekeeping, and confidentiality at work. (PSP) was second in the other 14 competencies (See Table 1).

The results revealed the significant role for IPA's Post-secondary programmes (PSP) in developing students' awareness of the importance of generic competencies, both hard and soft competencies. This might come as a result of the practical way that has been adopted in these programmes, which includes non-traditional means of teaching and training such as visiting a variety of workplaces, inviting industrial professionals to classes, and asking students to do some practical researches regarding their majors.. etc.

In the second rank of importance was home/family/community. It scored the first place in 12 competencies. These competencies were: achievement orientation, concern for order, quality and accuracy, initiative, interpersonal understanding, relationship building, teamwork and cooperation, self-confidence, flexibility, organisational commitment, problem solving, personal planning and organisational skills, and

energy & passion. Home/family/community scored second place in 12 competencies. These competencies were: analytical thinking, conceptual thinking, computer literacy, written communication, English language (writing), English language (speaking), information seeking, ability and willingness to learn, developing others, directiveness, team leadership, and self-control. Home/family/community came third in the following seven competencies: technical expertise, English language (overall), customer service orientation, impact and influence on others, organisational awareness, attendance and timekeeping, and confidentiality at work (See Table 88).

The results showed that home/family/community has a higher impact in developing students' awareness of the importance of a broad range of competencies than other sources, with more emphasis on soft competencies, particularly interpersonal skills, such as initiative, interpersonal understanding, relationship building, teamwork and cooperation, self-confidence, and flexibility. The advanced ranking of home/family/community amongst other sources has confirmed the significant role of open learning which allows students to be aware of and maintain contact with life's problems (Dearnley & Matthew, 2000).

Dearnley & Matthew (2000) suggested that intrinsic motivators are very important to assist adult learners, and individual's interaction with the society will create an appropriated climate to develop his/her awareness of the importance of competencies and activate the intrinsic motivators. Dearnley & Matthew found in their study (2004) which has discussed the pilot phase of the previous study that changing personal perceptions and epistemologies drove intrinsic motivation and thus impacted on social, professional and academic aspects of the participants' lives.

Another evidence for this impact of home/family/community in developing students' awareness of importance of competencies was by Smith (1999) who has stated in his introduction that social learning theory posits that people learn from observing other people. Smith added that such observations take place in a social setting (Merriam and Caffarella 1991: 134).

The Co-op programme got the third rank of most important sources in developing students' awareness of importance of competencies. It came first in three competencies. These competencies were: customer service orientation, organisational awareness, and self-control, and second in the following five

competencies: technical expertise, English language (overall), impact and influence on others, attendance and timekeeping, and confidentiality at work, and third in 21 competencies, and fourth in two competencies (See Table 1).

The results revealed some logical conclusions as students ranked Co-op programme first in developing their awareness of such competencies as customer service orientation and organisational awareness; these kinds of competencies cannot be taught nor can students become aware of their importance away from the workplace. It seems also to be expected that students gave Co-op an advanced value in developing their awareness of competencies such as technical expertise, as this competency represents a student's major and future profession, and as a result should be developed in the workplace. This finding supports what several authors (Bowden et al., 2000, Barrie & Jones, 1999) have claimed - that graduate attributes are best developed in the context of discipline knowledge (Hager & Holland, 2006). By applying this knowledge in the workplace, graduates can have a dynamic understanding of discipline knowledge and an ability to practise effectively as employees. Likewise, the Co-op programme had a good impact on students' awareness of the importance of competencies like attendance and timekeeping, and confidentiality at work. The importance level of these moral/ethical competencies would be clearly apparent in the workplace as behavioural work ethics. Co-op also had an impact on the development of students' awareness of the English language (overall), even though Co-op came second after PSP, probably because students in post-secondary programmes join an English course for a one-year period of study. This study was in some measure in agreement with Raymond, McNabb and Matthaei (1993) who found that students ranked Co-operative education as the most important educational method to develop competencies for the workplace.

School was ranked fourth by students. It came third in two competencies, fourth in 25 competencies, and fifth in four (See Table 1). This result might reveal the gap between school and the workplace in developing students' awareness of importance of generic competencies required for the modern workplace. This result might suggested that students are very dependent on outside influences for developing skills and therefore only sure to highlight the importance of programmes like Co-op. The least important source for the development of students' awareness of

importance of competencies was self-taught. It came fourth in five competencies and in the last rank for the other 26 competencies (See Table 1).

In terms of most important sources in developing students' awareness of importance of the two categories hard and soft competencies, the rank order was similar for both categories. Post-secondary programme (PSP) was in the first place. Second was home/family/community, third came Co-op programme, fourth was school, and self-taught came in the last rank (See Tables 90 & 91). This result clearly reflected the effectiveness of IPA's Post-secondary Programmes in developing students' awareness of importance of the two types of competencies, and the impact of home/family/community in this objective. Co-operative education programmes were effective as well; as the short term has been applied in comparison to the long timescales of other sources. The surprise might come over schools' effort in developing students' awareness of the importance of competencies, which is the base of preparing students for the workplace.

This result may lead us to repeat with Zinser (2003) the question of whether teachers are competent to provide instruction on employability skills, and whether teacher training programmes are preparing teachers to do so.

Harrison (1986) requires school to hold the responsibility for developing students' employability opportunities. He asserted that general employability skills must be taught at school through words and actions.

This effectiveness of Co-operative education and home/family/community in developing students' awareness of the importance of the generic competencies might refer to the deep approaches of learning students had through the Co-op or during their life at home and in the community. This deep understanding of knowledge and situations results from the observation and interaction that give a learner the ability to construct her/his own learning. Constructivists believe that learning is self-regulating and socially mediated as the student actively engages, interacts, and operates within the confines of his or her environment. The strong impact of IPA's Post-secondary graduate programmes in developing students' awareness of the importance of generic competencies may also reflect the practical approach that has been adopted in these programmes, which includes non-traditional means of teaching and training such as visiting various workplaces, inviting industrial professionals to classes, and asking

students to do some practical research regarding their majors.. etc. As learning, to the constructivist, is focused on cognitive, not behavioural processes, it seems that the low effectiveness of school as one of the sources in this study relates to the surface approach to learning that is still applied by students who are influenced by teachers' poor teaching (Biggs, 1999). The poor effectiveness of school and self-taught sources, which came in the last rank, might give more attention to the role of missing 'scaffolding' which means according to Vygostky (1978) the assistance provided to the learner by a "more knowledgeable other" (MKO). This assistance is very important, as what a learner can learn in a particular timeframe is limited, so he has what is called 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD). ZPD is the distance between the "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygostky, 1978, p. 86). This assistance provided to students by teachers in schools and supervisors in the Co-op programmes represents the role of "more knowledgeable other" (MKO) in this study. This role of MKO is essential as higher education institutes appear to offer little in the way of scaffolding or support to help students transfer skills out of the university and into the workplace (Bennett et al., 2000).

The role of MKO proved that lifelong learning is not just a form of self-empowerment and self-emancipation. The case is not limited to what graduate attributes are, the conceptions of how they might be developed are also hierarchical. Lifelong learning requires an individual to benefit from "more knowledgeable other" (MKO) as a facilitator of learning providing her/him with the (scaffolding) she/he needs. This assistance provided by 'more knowledgeable other' (MKO) (Vygostky, 1978), should be further improved by using some tools such as the Johari Window model (Luft & Ingham, 1955). This model is useful for illustrating and improving self-awareness. In applying the Johari Window concept the aim is to develop the 'open area' for a learner (what is known by the person about him/herself and is also known by others), because when he/she works in this area with others he/she is at our most effective and productive and the team is at its most productive too. This is because it is the space where good communications and cooperation occur, free from distractions, mistrust, confusion, conflict and misunderstanding.

The open area is small for a new team member or member in a new team because others know

little about the new person. Similarly, the blind area is small because others know little about him/her. The hidden or avoided area is a relatively large one, while the unknown area is the largest. As Emotional Intelligence provide a new way to understand and assess people's behaviours, management styles, attitudes, interpersonal skills, and potential, it has an affective role in the operation of developing

individuals' interpersonal competencies. The effectiveness of educators and trainers in the Co-op workplace would be stronger on the students for those who have a high range of EQ. That because EQ can reduce stress for individuals and organisations, by decreasing conflict, improving relationships and understanding, and increasing stability, continuity and harmony.

Table 1 Rank values of most Important Sources which Developed their Awareness of the Importance of competencies as obtained by conducting (Ranko) direct rank method for each competency (N=99)

Competency	Home/family/ community	Schoo 1	PSP	Co-op Programme	Self-taught
<i>Hard skills</i>	2	4	1	3	5
Analytical thinking	2	4	1	3	5
Conceptual thinking	2	4	1	3	5
Technical expertise	3	5	1	2	4
Computer literacy	2	4	1	3	4
Written communication	2	4	1	3	5
Personal planning and organizational skills	1	4	2	3	5
<i>Soft skills</i>	2	4	1	3	5
Achievement orientation	1	4	2	3	5
Concern for order, quality and accuracy	1	3	2	4	5
Initiative	1	4	2	3	5
Information seeking	2	5	1	3	4
Interpersonal understanding	1	4	2	3	5
Ability and willingness to learn	2	3	1	4	5
Customer service orientation	3	5	2	1	4
Impact and influence on other	3	4	1	2	5
Organisational awareness	3	4	1	1	5
Relationship building	1	4	2	3	5
Developing others	2	4	1	3	5
Directiveness	2	4	1	3	5
Teamwork and cooperation	1	4	2	3	5
Team leadership	2	4	1	3	5
Self control	2	4	2	1	5
Self confidence	1	4	2	3	5
Flexibility	1	4	2	3	5
Organisational commitment	1	4	2	3	5
Problem solving	1	4	2	3	5
Energy & passion	1	5	2	3	4
English language (overall)	3	4	1	2	5

English language (writing)	2	4	1	3	5
English language (speaking)	2	4	1	3	5
Attendance, and Timekeeping	3	4	1	2	5
Confidentiality at work	3	4	1	2	5
Competencies (overall)	2	4	1	3	5

Conclusion

The study clearly reflected the effectiveness of IPA's Post-secondary Programmes in developing students' awareness of the importance of competencies, and the impact of home/family/community in this objective. The study also asserted that Co-operative education programme was effective as well; based on its short-term impact in comparison to the long-term influence expected by other sources. The study revealed a lack of effort in schools directed to developing students' awareness of the importance of competencies.

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