

Language, literacy, numeracy and employability skill**Abstract**

Employability skills are not a new concept. They include non-technical skills and competencies that have always been an important part of effective and successful participation in the workplace. This article aims to benefit Vocational Education and Training (VET) educators with a better understanding of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) and employability skill.

Employability skills present themselves and can be assessed in a myriad of ways, in such they are "multimodal" and they are contextualised "multiplicities", as such they can be difficult to deliver and assess using traditional LLN teaching methods. Their explicit inclusion in Training Packages represents their value, especially the demand that industry has put upon them as part of a competency based training system required for successful participation in the workplace. In 2002 The Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), with funding from the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), published *Employability Skills for the Future* (2002).

To a better understanding of LLN and employability skills this article will explore employability skills (what they are), their implication to the educators/employers and strategies that can be put in place to ensure effective VET learning is achieved.

Introduction

Employability skills are the non-technical skills and knowledge necessary for effective participation in the workforce, and can include skills such as communication, self-management, problem solving and teamwork. They are also sometimes referred to as generic skills, capabilities, enabling skills or key competencies, such as: multimodal communication, collaborative writing, language analysis and structure, online networking, and one-to-one mobile computing. (Warschauer and Liaw, 2010)

The three education sectors (schools, VET and universities) have different approaches to employability skills, with schools and universities tending to take a broader approach, encompassing general life skills, as well as skills for employment.

VET qualifications that adhere to National Training Packages are strict in their design and allow for contextualisation as long as elements and performance criteria are not removed. Employability skills are however parts of Training Packages that are contextualised by their very nature. A good example of this would be employability skill that encompass communication literacies, different industries and trades training packages would have different expectations on this, and rightly so, a tradesperson would need to communicate different information and in different manner to an accountant or a hospitality employee.

Delivering training and interpretation of evidence becomes more difficult when trying to apply traditional LLN principals because employability skills are by their nature multi-modal in their expression and are subject to multiplicity by their context.

Employability skills – What they are

Employability skills can be gained in lots of ways and in many areas of your life, including at school, in the community, at work, and through hobbies and sport. Employability skills are

often considered essential in helping a person obtain a job, or stay in a job and progress to higher levels. The non-technical (employability) skills required in a job will vary widely between different occupations and industries, and will complement the specific technical or academic skills essential to that job. The following are the employability skills as cited in *Employability Skills for the Future* (DEEWR, 2002).

Employability skills as described in the 2002 Employability Skills Framework are required to gain employment or establish an enterprise. Australian employers have identified eight groups of skills that they consider are essential to successful workplace performance in all employment. Each skill group will be addressed as the literacies purpose and how it would be expressed in a work environment.

Communication skills

Communication skills contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers, they encompass; listening and understanding, speaking clearly and directly, writing to the needs of the audience, negotiating responsively, reading independently, empathising and using numeracy effectively to name a few traits.

Employer expectations range from interacting with customers at work, receiving and following instructions from managers at work, calculating and counting back correct change to facilitating group brain storming and planning sessions, providing clear goals and motivation to fellow employees and staff members and interacting with customers and stakeholders.

Team work

Team work skills contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes they include skills such as; coaching, mentoring and giving feedback, applying teamwork skills to a range

of situations and working with people of different ages, gender, race, religion or political persuasion

Employer expectations range from supervising a team, training new team members, performing duties to a high standard to facilitate the achievement of team goals to being a buddy / mentor for a trainee, being respectful of everyone's skills and experiences and listening and supporting suggestions from all members of the team.

Problem solving

Problem solving skills contribute to productive outcomes combines skill like; applying a range of strategies to problem solving, developing creative, innovative, practical solutions and showing independence and initiative in identifying problems and solving them.

Employer expectations range from working out transport options, balancing the register at the end of a shift, finding solutions to meet complex customer needs and requests, preparing a personal schedule so that all expected tasks are completed to suggesting suitable changes to a roster if staff are sick, organising child care arrangements which fit in with work commitments and identifying problems or issues in the workplace.

Initiative and enterprise

Initiative and enterprise skills contribute to innovative outcomes and they include; adapting to new situations, being creative and translating ideas into action

Employer expectations range from requesting and taking on more responsibility at work, researching promotional ideas to coming up with a marketing plan, initiating a planning or brainstorming meeting and suggesting efficiencies or money saving measures.

Planning and organising

Planning and organising skills contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning and they involve skills such as; managing time and priorities, setting timelines, coordinating tasks for self and with others, establishing clear project goals and deliverables and allocating people and other resources to tasks.

Employer expectations range from seeking potential hosts and planning the most appropriate contacts, planning goals and objectives to defining project goals, steps required in the project, identifying customer target groups and developing an annual work plan for your team or area.

Self-management

Self-management skills contribute to employee satisfaction and growth and involve; having a personal vision and goals, evaluating and monitoring own performance and taking responsibility.

Employer expectations range from organising transport to get to and from work, discussing potential promotions and career options with a manager, contributing ideas for improvements in the workplace to reviewing career development needs, reviewing own work performance and identifying strengths and weaknesses and taking advantage of professional development opportunities.

Learning

Learning skills contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes, they encompass; managing own learning, contributing to the learning community at the workplace and being open to new ideas and techniques.

Employer expectations range from training in the use of machines and equipment at work, pursuing training opportunities within an organization, discussing your learning and professional development needs with your manager to pursuing professional development

course opportunities at work, chasing up work shadowing or job exchange opportunities and pursuing extra responsibilities and associated training..

Technology skills

Technology skills contribute to effective execution of tasks, they include skills such as; having a range of basic IT skills, being willing to learn new IT skills and having the occupational health and safety knowledge to apply technology.

Employer expectations range from tuning a car - using the technology associated with mechanics, participating in training and development programs, online learning to using computerised machinery, using a network register system and using electronic menu pads in the hospitality industry.

Employability skills – The implication to VET and Employers

Industry has increasingly demanded more generic employability skills to complement the specific technical or academic skills essential to that job. Employability skills are an essential part of LLN in a VET environment, as the education is aimed at training students to meet industries need. (Townsend, Waterhouse, 2008)

The challenge in teaching and assessing employability is two-fold, firstly is it possible to teach it effectively in a VET environment and secondly how can it be done?

It is important to deliver employability skill learning in a VET environment since they are part of the national training packages but they are inescapably work-related and this is where issues can arise. The role of workplaces – and therefore employers, cannot be denied. The report “Whose responsibility? Employers views on developing their workers literacy, numeracy and employability skills” by Ray Townsend and Peter Waterhouse states:

It is not realistic to expect the education and training system to provide employers with job-ready applicants, complete with all of the literacy, numeracy and employability skills required by employers

The role of workplaces is significant for the learning and development of employability skills and their impact within the workplace can be quite profound (Smith & Comyn, 2003). The issue is that most VET providers are not the employers and the classroom is not the workplace.

As discussed in the report, Townsend and Waterhouse argue that the solution to this issue relies on a collaborative effort: education and training providers and employers working together for the benefit of individuals and their organisations.

Employability skills – Strategies

Employability skills are an excellent example of an endorsed capability (competency) in VET that would benefit from multiliteracies principals. In understanding this there can be an investigation of pedagogic strategies and approaches to delivering effective teaching in employability skills that could be adopted by the educator.

Multiliteracies is a concept that has gained support since the 1990s. The New London Group 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures', where the "multi" refers to both the multiplicity of literacies (for different purposes in different contexts) and the multimodal (different methods/media) aspect of literacy and as such is ideal for delivering and assessing employability skills.

The Multiliteracies approach has great benefits but is not taught directly at any great lengths at TAE40110 Cert IV TAE level, which is the minimal qualification that VET educators need to deliver National Endorsed Training Packages that contain employability skills. Virgona et al. (2003) also highlighted important connections between contemporary understandings of multiliteracies and the discourse of generic and employability skills

Multimodal - Delivery and Assessing

Mode of Literacy is a key concept as during the last two centuries the advent and accessibility of new technologies has jolted this understanding to view literacy as a more flexible group of skills and strategies than just reading and writing, the multimodal nature of literacy encompasses new communications practices including non-verbal, spoken, print, visual and multimodal communications practices (Kalantzis and Cope 2009).

Employability skills by their nature are multi-modal, from the way they are expressed to the way they are gained, and include the ability to calculate, comprehend, communicate, analyse, and organise at levels commensurate with the level and type of work being undertaken. As such it would be near impossible to successfully evaluate or deliver in a traditional LLN format.

Multi modal learning is a concept that VET educators should be aware of, as VET training does cover different learning styles (such as David A. Kolb styles model, The Honey & Mumford stages and Fleming's VARK model), and delivery methods (such as tutorial, brainstorming, Q and A, discussions, role-plays, written activities/tasks, case studies, simulation, audio or visual activities and demonstration to name a few). This means that VET educators should have a good grasp of multi-modality even though they may be unaware of the terminology.

Multiplicity – Contextualisation

The context and purpose of literacy is the second key concept of multiliteracy, the multiplicity of literacy practices, such as being mechanical or computer literate, and there is critical thinking and linguistic and cultural diversity. (Kalantzis and Cope 2009).

Employability skills are inevitably embedded within a particular context. These capacities do not exist within a vacuum. They are formed and demonstrated within

social and cultural contexts. They are inevitably 'situated' and the situation, or context, determines their form and shape. (Townsend, Waterhouse, 2008)

Understanding of workplace literacy was consistent with Hull's definition. This reflects a contextualised view, appreciating that literacy is tied to language, purpose(s) and workplace relations.

To be literate in a workplace means being a master of a complex set of rules and strategies which govern who uses texts, and how, and for what purpose. [To be literate is to know] ...when to speak, when to be quiet, when to write, when to reveal what was written, and when and whether and how to respond to texts already written. (Hull 1995, p.19)

The Australian Government is extremely concerned about this and is funding a new framework for employability skills called Core Skills for Employment, The first stage of this work, conducted by Ithaca Group Pty Ltd on behalf of the Government, involved research and broad consultation to develop a draft framework. It involved discussions with over 700 individuals in all sectors, and was completed in December 2011. Their number one recommendation is;

We recommend that the Framework focus specifically on 'the non-technical skills and knowledge necessary for effective participation in the workforce', as distinct from those required more broadly in society. Participation in the workforce could be as an employee, an employer, as a self-employed worker, or a volunteer. (DEEWR, 2011)

The multiplicity of employment skills is that they rely heavily on the context in which they are used. As such one skill could mean different things to the different industries where it is applied. This is key factor, and as such this is where the VET educators experience in industry comes to play. VET educators are required (by TAFE at least) to have substantial and current industry experience and to continually be involved in professional development.

This helps to an extent that the VET trainer is aware of what industry expects of these employability skills because they have been involved in the industry.

Possible solution

Effective strategies in delivering employability skills should include the workplace and there is more than one way at accomplishing this.

Workplace training is the most obvious method in that it delivers VET training in the workplace environment and surrounded by that culture.

When VET education is carried out in a VET campus environment, simulations are a method that could “simulate” the workplace environment and culture.

VET student that have no exposure to a workplace would benefit from work placement as it offers the student to be part of a workplace environment and experience the culture for a short period.

The last strategy that is critical is the currency of VET Educators own experience of workplace culture. How can an educator that has never worked or has been out of industry for a substantial amount of time cannot be expected to deliver or assess employability skills.

Conclusion

Employability skills are a complex issue, their delivery and assessment can be multi-modal and extremely contextualised and as such VET educator needs to be aware of multiliteracies principals to better understand them. Additionally the context means that where they are delivered, class versus workplace is also of great concern, current literature suggest coalitions be formed between VET providers and employers to better bridge what the employers want and how VET sector can achieve it.

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