

Learning and teaching of generic skills and graduate attributes: ‘professionalism’ as a case example

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The increasingly vocational aims of higher education have led to universities specifying generic skills or attributes that employers can expect of their graduates. Having developed disciplinary knowledge and skills is no longer seen as adequate preparation for work. The skills that employers say they want in graduates are often generic, including attributes such as good communication skills, flexibility and creativity, leadership skills, professionalism, etc.

Whilst higher education has a long history of teaching and assessing disciplinary skills, the concept of generic skills is less familiar to academics. They typically have difficulty being explicit about the nature of skills that they themselves developed *implicitly*, such as critical thinking, problem solving, ethical awareness... This paper presents an approach to informing the design of teaching and learning activities to enhance student development of generic skills. The approach is evidence and theory-based, and involves four primary stages:

1. constitution of a cross-disciplinary institutional peer group of academics interested in enhancing student learning of a specific generic skill or attribute;
2. guided action research by each member of the group, based on interviewing approximately 6 students in their classes, using phenomenographic methods to investigate variation in the sophistication of students’ understandings of that skill or attribute;
3. group design of a set of learning activities to target the less sophisticated understandings identified in step 2, using the Variation Theory of Learning as a guiding framework; and
4. implementation of the new activity, followed by assessment of student learning outcomes.

Part of the power of the approach is the intense professional development of the academics involved that occurs. Academics’ awareness of pedagogical theory and

research is developed in an experiential fashion. At the same time, their own understanding of the skill/attribute being investigated is qualitatively enhanced, including their ability to articulate the nature and purpose of the skill/attribute, and both its generic and disciplinary dimensions.

The paper illustrates the approach using the graduate attribute of 'professionalism' in the University of Canberra as a case example. Four subject convenors from four disciplinary areas were involved, representing pharmacy, clinical psychology, media and international relations (IR). The courses included both undergraduate and postgraduate Masters.

Interviews were semi-structured, based around the following prompt questions:

- Think of a situation during [a recent WIL or future professional activity] in which professionalism was important
- What made professionalism particularly important here?
- How do you know when you are being professional in this situation?
- What are the potential consequences of *not* being professional in this situation?

Substantial variation in the sophistication of understandings of professionalism emerged amongst students, even at Masters level. This variation was often hidden by use of common terms such as expertise, ethics, trust, respect... but with different underlying understandings of what those terms mean and what purpose they play in being professional.

The following elements of professionalism emerged from the interviews:

- *Expertise* – knowledge, experience
- *Conduct* – dress, behaviour, language, interaction
- *Ethics* – standards, codes, values, morals
- *Impact* – self, clients, peers, stakeholders
- *Being* – within or beyond the workplace

However, each element was understood in a more or less sophisticated way. Documenting the variation through interview and analysis enabled clarification of what distinguished more from less sophisticated understandings, pinpointing where pedagogical attention needed to be focused.

Expertise was varyingly understood as (1) having knowledge or (2) combining knowledge with self awareness, eg:

1. “Knowing what’s going on, being able to answer every question that’s thrown at you” (Media)
2. “It’s self-reflexivity, being aware that you may not be right or that you have certain biases” (IR)

Conduct was varyingly understood as (1) predetermined or (2) responsive to context, eg:

1. “... the way you would speak to people, your conduct with people, so you know inappropriate behaviour in or outside of a workplace” (Media)
2. “... being aware of others around you and how to respond in situations and what is appropriate and what isn’t” (Pharmacy)

Ethics was varyingly understood as (1) externally determined or (2) internally determined, eg:

1. “aligning my behaviour and methods with ethical guidelines as governed by the ruling regulatory bodies” (Psychology)
2. “I know there’s code of conducts ... I don’t really understand the need for them to be drawn up because I feel that it’s instilled in me through other – my upbringing, through life” (IR)

The **impact** of professionalism (or unprofessionalism) was variously understood as primarily affecting (1) you and your business or (2) your clients and profession

1. “... the pharmacist is going to lose business. So it’s a business transaction.” (Pharmacy)
2. “..., if the patient loses respect for the pharmacist ... that could have implications for his taking the medication properly.” (Pharmacy)

Being professional was varyingly understood as (1) a workplace persona or (2) a part of you as a person:

- “They’ve got to put on their garb and ... get into that zone of professionalism” (IR)
- “It’s not something that you just put on. You either are professional or you’re not. I guess it’s not an act that you have to play, so it’s not something that you can really switch off.” (Pharmacy)

Aligned with more or less sophisticated understandings of each element was a marked variation in the perceived purpose of professionalism, as primarily to:

- **benefit you**

To me it means being valued for what you do and also having that value shown, possibly, maybe through money, so if you're paid for your services. I'm trying to think of anything else that it means. I think that's basically all...
(Psychology)

- **benefit others**

I think it means to be knowledgeable about what you're doing, to provide the best possible services that you can within your field and to benefit the patient and to make positive changes in their life. (Psychology)

In response to the interview findings, the subject convenors worked to develop case studies for discussion with students that highlighted less obvious aspects of professionalism: self-awareness, responsiveness, internal as well as external standards, impact on others and personal relevance outside the workplace.