

Creating business-ready graduates: Embedding a professional ethos in the 21st century learning experience

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Outline

The question of how universities can (or should) create “business ready”, graduate professionals is moot. What is clear, however, is a general consensus in the scholarly discourse that employers are seeking graduates equipped, not only with knowledge, but also with a general skill set that prepares them for the workplace. The 1997 Dearing review identified “key” or “core” personal development skills such as communication as essential to graduates’ “future success ... whatever they intend to do in later life” (Burk 2002) . It is a view echoed in a very-recently published ABS report which found employability to be enhanced by a “business ready mindset” which includes skills such as “communication, self-awareness [and] people management ...to be effective in practice” (ABS, 2014). Higher education, then, must provide a learning experience that is: “robust and relevant, enabling students to embrace an innovative, ethical and entrepreneurial ethos, and bring this into the workplace”. (ABS 2014). If this is so, graduates need to take more than knowledge into practice with them. The emphasis upon employability highlights a need for universities to create, not just graduates, but graduates who are professionals.

The question remains, however, of who is responsible for students’ personal development and professional behaviour: the university or the student? Very different approaches have been taken at two American universities. Hall and Bernadino (2006) note that the discourse indicates staff, students and employers alike agree that professional behaviour is important for career success. They suggest measures staff might take in the classroom to provide opportunities for students to experience ethical decision making, appropriate meeting-behaviour, punctuality and professional dress. How that can be achieved and how, or whether, professionalism can be assessed require further discussion. In contrast, a group of students at Northern-Illinois University developed a code of student conduct, highlighting integrity and professional behaviour (Verschoor 2004).

This presentation explores the presenters’ approach of a staff/student partnership as a means to address students’ issues with classmates’ challenging classroom behaviour and a vehicle to move the scholarly discourse from partnership to community in order to enhance employability. The presenters outline their research and present it as a case study in that process, discussing their methodology, data analysis and findings before exploring options for future research.

In response to concerns raised in NSS and other forums by students about poor peer behaviour, the presenters conducted a small scale research project into the value of professional values in the classroom. Rather than staff simply telling students what we felt they needed to know about the value of professional values we invited interested students to join a steering group. The steering group designed a data-gathering and analysis regime and designed student-driven communication strategies.

The methodology adopted was to conduct focus groups to: gather students’ opinion about peer behaviour and establish the student conception of professionalism. The steering group then set an agenda to:

- ◆ identify the values associated with professional behaviour in the learning experience
- ◆ articulate an existing code of student conduct in terms of professional behaviour
- ◆ devise a range of resources to communicate professional values and their significance to the wider student body

Analysis revealed several intriguing dichotomies between the staff and student views. These were typically associated with a micro vs. macro perception of the learning experience and a sense of whose responsibility it is to enforce behavioural standards in the classroom and drive the agenda.

For example, students often need staff support to understand how and why to moderate their own behaviour in ways that enable them to actively participate in and benefit from the learning experience. Yet, it is inconsistent with the philosophy of higher education for staff to attempt to manage student behaviour in an authoritarian manner. Our research indicates that actively engaging students in shaping expectations of peer behaviour in this way empowers them to assume shared responsibility for, to embrace and enact professional values in the classroom as a member of a community grounded in the core principle of respect.

Active partnering with students to construct solutions to a challenge in the learning experience has been an effective vehicle for promoting debate between staff and students about the process of engagement in learning. Repositioning both perspectives to view the learning experience through the lens of a community of learners, as opposed to individual attainment, was fundamental to empowering staff and students alike to recognise that transformative knowledge and skill are developed through the process of learning. Self-awareness of the consequences of individuals' actions on the community was the vehicle for appreciating the imperative for professionalism in the classroom.

References

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