

Contrasting employability interventions

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For links and materials related to this talk, see:
<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/talks/employ.html>

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Outline

The aim is to start a discussion about how we should think about practical interventions (at GU) related to employability.

- I'll describe 3 very different ones currently running at GU
 - Professional skills 10 credit compulsory module (Psych)
 - Graduate Skill Programme: optional, additional (SocPsy)
 - Employing Arts & Humanities (optional, 20-30 credit) (Arts)
- I'll offer a set of dimensions for comparing and contrasting them
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- Discussion (that means you)

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**Part A:
Dimensions for comparison**

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1. Scalability

How do costs rise for a given course / intervention, as student numbers rise?

E.g. with lectures, costs are fixed: almost flat / scalable: they don't rise much.

With final year project supervision, costs are proportional: they rise linearly, in proportion to the number of students.

Scalability affects whether the course is likely to reach most students.

Teachers are often more comfortable with low numbers, perhaps because they can get away with little preparation and manage problems on the spot. In contrast some solutions, such as having students write MCQs for their class, only work well with big numbers. PeerWise.

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**2. Level of the (graduate) Skill :
Low vs. high level**

Low: how to write a CV

High: Critical thinking applied to your discipline from the outside

Medium: many "graduate attributes" are only taught to a medium level. E.g. critical thinking but only as applying technical disciplinary criteria; writing, but only in the one or two formats used in the discipline's publications; giving a talk, but not where it matters whether you convince anyone to take action.

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**3. Discipline specificity
of the content**

This attribute is whether the content of the employability intervention is specific to a single discipline, or applies to a broad area (e.g. all science and engineering), or to all students.

Issues include:

- Economies of scale are favoured by broad applicability.
- Some issues that sound generic (critical thinking, problem solving) in fact are quite different in different disciplines
- Presenting a topic with discipline-specific examples has big positive effects on students' perception of relevance. (AAW)
- *(Ditto for embedding a topic in a single subject's courses: see next slide.)*

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4. Integration into degree programmes

Is the intervention “bolt-on” or an integral part of the students’ degree programme?

Or (intermediate?) “linked”: where the work is uncredited (add-on) but the content is directly connected e.g. written reflection on their credited work.

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5. Which transition?

HEIs have to deal with, and preferably support, not one but two transitions which every student must master:

1. Going from a mix of subjects at school, to specialising in a single discipline in HE. Learning with different skills, with almost no personal supervision, in huge classes. Study skills.
2. Going from a single discipline in HE and generalising to the varied contexts and multi-skilling which jobs require. Employability skills.

Lumping them together can obscure the essentially opposing nature of these two transitions.

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Part B: Current Employability Interventions

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Professional skills module Ian Bushnell

Taught as a 10 credit compulsory module in level 3 in Psychology. N = 170 currently. Assessed by portfolio.

Theory and practice of job candidate selection: Market analysis, role analysis. Interviews, questionnaire tests, personal reflective histories, CV writing, job application letter writing.

Students are lukewarm about the lectures, strongly favourable once they’ve done the portfolio, more enthusiastic yet after they start applying for jobs.

Now taught from a textbook without disciplinary content: could in principle be taught in every subject area; but has so far only been taught in psychology.

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Comparative dimensions: Professional skills module

1. Scalability: Mainly fixed; marking the portfolios is proportional
2. Level of the skill: Mixed? CVs are low, but working out what kind of job is suitable for you personally is high.
3. Discipline-specificity: none
4. Integration into degree programme: Complete
5. Which transition?: 2nd (HE to work)

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GSP: Graduate Skills Programme Dickon Copey

Highly modularised, not for credit (but certificated), Offered to the Social Sciences college (and this also includes Education, Law, Business)

As of today, it has served 470 out of 4,200 undergraduates and 2,500 taught p/gs. First year it has run.

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**Comparative dimensions:
GSP**

1. Scalability: Mainly fixed: Fixed for the moodle parts; proportional for the ELA workshops.
2. Level of the skill: Mainly low level? But includes reflection
3. Discipline-specificity: Broad area of the SocSci currently, but perhaps relatively easy to expand?
4. Integration into degree programme: none as to credits; but linked in that students explicitly reflect on their degree work.
5. Which transition?: both

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**AAW: Advancing Academic Writing
Katie Grant**

- Sets of moodle exercises for self-paced student use.
- Grouped by writing topic from low (punctuation) to high (the formats used in that discipline e.g. reports, essay structures, ...)
- Based on a sample of actual problems seen in student work in that discipline. Exercises illustrated by actual examples from the discipline.
- Customised tutor feedback sheets, so that each piece of student work can be commented on in terms of which AAW topic merits more attention by ticking boxes.

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**Comparative dimensions:
AAW**

1. Scalability: Entirely fixed per student (moodle exercises). (Proportional per subject area for creating the subject-specific versions.)
2. Level of the skill: Not just low level, but up to higher but discipline-specific levels (low to medium level on this dim.)
3. Discipline-specificity: High. Generic idea; but each discipline gets its own examples, hot topics, formats for its writing,
4. Integration into degree programme: Individualised feedback sheets for tutors to use. Subjects may make writing quality a marking criterion on all assignments.
5. Which transition?: First: fixing low level skills, and making the writing fully discipline specific (for your HE discipline).

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**EAH: Employing Arts & Humanities
Alice Jenkins, Vicky Gunn**

Taught as a 20 or 30 credit final year option in the Arts faculty. N=15. First year it has run.

Aims: To combat both the real and perceived gap between their discipline-fostered skills and the employment environment.

- a) Have them reflect on and articulate how an Arts degree leads to valuable employment attributes
- b) Have them deal with unfamiliar challenges with positivity, not despair.
- c) Some lower level skills e.g. writing in different formats,...
- d) Hence addressing low NSS scores about "confidence"

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EAH (2)

Topics include:

- Project management
- An art class (survive the unfamiliar)
- Voice coaching
- Head hunter session and group interview
- Giving a talk on a personal interest to a non-specialist audience

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**Comparative dimensions:
EAH**

1. Scalability: Mainly proportional: individual attention in small group workshops
2. Level of the skill: Wide spectrum, from low level to studying general arguments about Arts as education.
3. Discipline-specificity: Broad area of the humanities.
4. Integration into degree programme: partial (option course)
5. Which transition?: 2nd (HE to work)

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**Part C:
Alors,**

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Understanding your discipline from outside

A candidate for a 6th dimension of comparison:
Learn to see and discuss your discipline from outside. This is valuable to students because:

- Higher critical thinking, self-assessment of the discipline
- Understanding how it is, and is not, useful to others
- Advanced talk-giving: how to articulate to outsiders the heart of how each discipline thinks. [Landauer; Wall on pain; Gordon on materials sci.]
- Relating pure and applied ...

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Nominal indeterminism

Having the same name doesn't mean things have any meaning in common e.g. "Steve", or "nice" or "cool".

This applies to "PDP" (which transition is being addressed?) It also applies to many phrases used in "graduate attributes". These often mean quite different, in fact contradictory, things in different disciplines.

Wingate's arguments against seeing "study skills" as generic.

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N.B. "Problem solving"

Employers frequently say they want graduates to do this. But really there are 3 contrasting component skills:

- a) Problematising: taking what others are letting slide by as OK, and flagging it up as something that needs treating as a problem. Every time a big fraud in a firm emerges, it is because people (auditors, ...) let it by. In fact employers need problem-spotters, although not all realise this.
- b) Redefining an identified but ill-specified problem into something specific that can be addressed.
- c) Solving it: pushing through to an actionable decision and conclusion. Generally speaking, the Sciences drill their graduates on this all the time, and the Arts do not; (or perhaps the applied disciplines do but the pure ones do not.)

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Critical thinking

Is a defining attribute in some disciplines; more like "apple pie" in others. Nice but no resources will be allocated.

Means different things in different disciplines (Psychology vs. History)

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AAW-2: advanced writing

Most of us feel, strongly and unconsciously, that there is just one thing which is good writing.

Writing within a discipline is often a very narrow genre.

There is a big gap between disciplinary writing and what work will demand. A course to manage this (2nd) transition might feature:

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AAW-2: advanced writing

- First job in any new writing task is to find out by yourself what the requirements are for the new genre.
- Writing for specific audiences: argument structures, ...
- Learn to use sources like dictionaries, Fowler, citation manuals etc. what the rules are: not rely on others to tell you
- Teach them to read: (for style,) as part of writing
- Think of the; reader, not blind rules
- Use peer critics
- Writing for non-captive audiences: pyramid structure

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table

	Pro/Sk	GSP	EAH	AAW	AAW-2
Scalability	✓	✓	-	✓✓	✓✓
Level	Mixed	Low	Mixed	Mixed	High
Disciplinary	none	College	College	Yes	?No
Integration	✓✓	-	partial	✓	-
Transition	2nd	1 st , 2 nd	2 nd	1 st	2 nd
Outside perspective	-	-	✓✓	-	-

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A place to stop

For the slides, handout etc. see:

<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/talks/employ.html>

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