Fostering Generic Skills through Participatory Learning Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Developing approaches to foster Generic Skills in the workplace and in training organizations has kindled much enthusiasm among the international fraternity of educators. Learner-centered approaches like experiential learning and problem-based learning resulted from researches in this direction. Developing specific programs which focus on a particular generic skill, using authentic experiences as much as possible to help people learn or reflect on their skills and teaching through participatory learning strategies, helps the development of generic skills. Participatory Learning helps to foster personal, educational and professional growth of the learner. The objective of Participatory Learning is to provide a more conducive learning environment wherein the students shoulder an active role in the learning process. In participatory learning, the classroom environment is issue-based and democratic thereby facilitating student-centered pedagogies. The strategies of participatory learning involve approaches which put students at the center of the learning process as well as the society. Through participatory learning strategies the acquisition of generic skills becomes more enjoyable, meaningful and exciting. The purpose of the study was to explore the possibilities of fostering Generic Skills among student teachers through Participatory Learning. The generic skills among student teachers were assessed using the Generic Skills Inventory. The findings of the study revealed significant difference between Traditional Learning Strategies and Participatory Learning Strategies in developing Generic Skills among student teachers. The study recommends the adoption of Participatory Learning Strategies in fostering Generic Skills.

Key words: Student Teachers, Participatory Learning Strategies, Generic Skills, Fostering.

INTRODUCTION

There is a high demand for generic skills in the workplace. Individuals too, need a wide range of generic skills and personal attributes to get employed as well as to form and maintain family and community relationships. The conceptualization of generic skills is complex in many ways. Generic skills are those that apply across a variety of jobs and life contexts. They are known by several names like core skills, key competencies, transferable skills and employability skills, which are developed throughout a person's life and in multiple settings including work, life and educational settings.

Every sector of education has a role to play in helping people develop their generic skills. Employers today are looking for more than just technical skills and university degree. They particularly value employability and skills like communication, teamwork and problem solving. Employability is an individual's capacity to get employment not because of the educational qualifications only, but also of the skills, competencies and attitude to work with integrity and commitment. Job aspirants who possess employability and can demonstrate these skills have a real advantage. Ever since the concept of employability gained recognition all over the world, the significance of generic skills also increased.

DEFINING GENERIC SKILLS

Generic skills are often perceived as high-level skills that are transferable and independent of subjects or discipline. They are the basic skills necessary for doing a job well. They enable a person to take initiatives, adopt a problem-solving approach, make sound and critical decisions and contribute to the overall growth of the organization. Generic skills are valued over and above the technical or job-specific skills due to their generic nature. The generic skills include reading and writing skills, communication skills and computational skills along with logical reasoning, problem solving and decision making which make an individual an asset to the organization. Thus, lifelong learning and employability is contingent upon well-developed generic skills. The competencies and knowledge which form the basis of lifelong learning are often referred to as generic skills. Harvard, Hughes & Clark (1998) defined generic skills as those skills that students need to become successful learners and successful practitioners in their fields of study and work and in other aspects of their life and are an important outcome of university education.

Review of research on generic skills revealed that there is no single definitive list of generic skills. In different countries different sets of generic skills are listed and followed, all with similarity and consistency to each other. The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (1993) proposed eight essential generic skills viz., communication skills, information skills, self management and competitive skills, physical skills, numeracy skills, problem solving skills, cooperative skills, work and study skills. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) of United Kingdom have developed a set of six generic skills viz., information technology skills, application of numbers, skills in working with others, skills to improve learning and performance and problem solving skills. Bennett, Dunne & Carre (1999) defined generic skills as those skills associated with being able to manage self, others, information and task. They proposed a framework comprising the four broad generic skills relevant in the higher education sector. A framework comprising eight generic skills that was prepared for the present study, after careful scrutiny of various lists of generic skills, is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 - Framework of Generic Skills

Generic Skills	Skill Focus
Thinking Skills	reasoning, critical thinking, creative thinking
Computation Skills	following instructions, arithmetic, spatial ability
Communication Skills	speech, reading, writing, listening, expression
Problem Solving Skills	analyzing, decision making, applying, verifying
Independent Learning Skills	study habits, planning, research, evaluation
Information Processing Skills	technology, multimedia awareness, using library
Team Management Skills	discussing, cohesion, commitment, cooperation
Self Management Skills	knowing self, managing time, using resources

PARTICIPATORY LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING GENERIC SKILLS

It is very difficult to teach and develop generic skills through formal instruction. Despite widespread awareness of the need for developing generic skills, there are no absolute strategies for fostering these skills. Gibbs et. al. (1994) argue that the development of generic skills involves an experiential learning cycle which includes experiencing the skills, reflecting on performance, formalizing the gained knowledge, and planning and preparing activities. Seagraves, Kemp and Osborne (1996) suggested that university learning can be strengthened through workplace-based practical and applications. Generic Skills are therefore best developed in meaningful contexts and through participatory learning approaches integrated into the normal teaching programs in workplace-based setting. Fig-1 displays the flowchart of Participatory Learning Strategy designed for the present study.
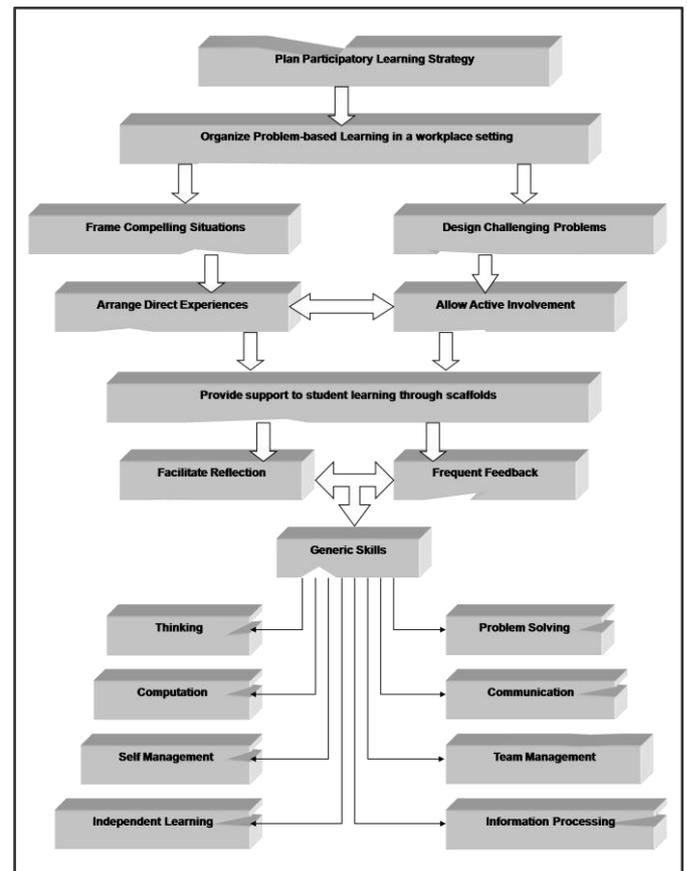

Fig1- Flowchart for Participatory Learning Strategy

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The recent explorations on participatory learning in problem-based environment provided impetus for this line of inquiry. The Participatory Learning Strategy included four subject-based compelling situations and four school-based challenging problems. A sample of 337 student teachers worked in a problem-based learning environment. Generic Skills Inventory was the tool used for the study. Critical ratios were computed to study the effect of Traditional

Learning Strategies and Participatory Learning Strategies on Generic Skills The details of the tests of significance are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Effect of Traditional and Participatory Learning Strategies on Generic Skills

Generic Skills	Learning Strategies				Critical Ratio
	Traditional		*Participatory*		
	M_1	σ_1	M_2	σ_2	
	(N_1=139)		*(N_2=198)*		
Thinking	14.26	2.06	15.31	2.83	3.89**
Computation	13.27	3.64	14.36	2.62	3.02**
Communication	12.33	2.81	13.43	2.01	3.93**
Problem Solving	11.24	3.63	12.63	2.98	3.72**
Independent Learning	12.38	4.22	13.81	3.43	3.31**
Information Processing	11.36	3.34	12.64	4.45	3.02**
Team Management	11.21	2.65	12.25	3.22	3.24**
Self Management	12.16	2.11	13.28	3.56	3.61**

** Significant at .01 level

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the test of significance as evident from Table 2, reveals that there is significant difference between the traditional learning strategies and participatory learning strategies with respect to fostering all the eight generic skills viz., Thinking Skills (C.R=3.89; P<.01), Computation Skills (C.R=3.02; P<.01), Communication Skills (C.R=3.93; P<.01), Problem Solving Skills (C.R=3.72; P<.01), Independent Learning Skills (C.R=3.31; P<.01), Information Processing Skills (C.R=3.02; P<.01), Team Management Skills (C.R=3.24; P<.01) and Self Management Skills (C.R=3.61; P<.01). From the mean scores it is further evident that the Participatory Learning Strategies is more effective than Traditional Learning Strategies in fostering Generic Skills. The hypothesis formulated in this context that there is significant difference between Traditional Learning Strategies and Participatory Learning Strategies in developing Generic Skills among student teachers is therefore well substantiated.

CONCLUSIONS

The Participatory Learning Strategies proposed in this study is an active and challenging learning activity that encourages team work as well as independent learning. It allows the teacher to be a facilitator who provides learning scaffolds and promotes a relatively enjoyable environment for the development of generic skills. Although the study was limited in terms of the nature of the data collected and the sample selected, the findings of the study appear to confirm that the participatory learning strategies implemented in a problem-based learning environment at workplace was strongly supportive in fostering student's generic skills. The Participatory Learning Strategies maybe broadened to include more generic skills depending on learner requirements

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