

Building Employability Skills for Graduate Students

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Abstract

Universities have recently been placing a greater emphasis on employability of their graduates. Academic discussions have introduced concepts such as transferable skills, employability, co-creation, active and networked learning, and sustainable transformation as strategies for bridging the gap between university studies and full-time employment after graduation. Collaborative initiatives with companies and organizations have become increasingly prevalent in university curricula, and administrative units have been established to help students transition from students to employees or entrepreneurs (Clark, 2015). This calls for innovating education, for example through increased emphasis on networked learning ((Dohn, Hansen, Hansen, de Laat & Ryberg 2021). This paper will present a case study that explores the effects of exposing university students to different environments than the traditional university campus and lecture rooms. The aim is to investigate whether this change of surroundings and introduction of different educational tools can broaden students' perspectives on their own capabilities and skills in co-creating solutions through, for example, collaborative engagement (NLEC 2021). The focus is on engaging students to address (wicked) problems in new contexts, which are often situated within sustainability and sustainable transformation frameworks. To accomplish this, the students are equipped with skills acquired at AAU and applied in diverse contexts (employability), and they are encouraged to think 'outside the box' through co-creation. This includes adapting to diverse sets of norms, values, and agendas, as well as hidden power alliances, when working and co-creating with external partners in a different context.

Keywords

Employability, active learning, sustainable transformation, co-creation, collaborative learning, networked learning.

Background

The paper draws on experiences from a 9th semester program at Aalborg University (AAU). Our students engage in collaborative learning in diverse contexts, both within and outside of Denmark with the objective of expanding their perspectives on problem-based learning (Kolmos et al. 2004), an approach that forms the cornerstone in learning at AAU. Problem-based learning is the core teaching method at AAU. Another aim of this course is to help students recognize the skills and competences they possess, which not only prove to be beneficial in academic settings but also hold great value in their future employment, thus we enhance competencies such as ability to work creatively, to identify problems and find solutions through enabling students' resources, which they have obtained through their master programs, much in line with the definition of purposes of networked learning presented by the Networked learning Editorial Collective (2021, p 316)). It is noteworthy that many students often are unaware of how their skills are transferable for solving tasks and creating solutions in their future employment (Andersson 2023; Helyer 2012, Bridgstock). We situate this paper within the networked learning field, which does not necessarily include digital learning. Rather, we emphasize the importance of context, situated learning (NLEC 2021) and we tap into two of six central questions of understanding 'what constitutes good and effective collaboration', namely the question of a) what skills are needed – what are collaboration skills, and b) How can collaboration be supported (Dohn et al 2021). These two questions are discussed through the example of a 9th semester teaching program.

Methods and Case

Preparing students for external collaborations between stakeholders and students is crucial for working in various contexts (Andersson & Clausen 2022; NLEC 2021)). This collaborative work can take the form of field trip or a more formal contract between students and organizations or companies. To prepare both field trips and collaborations with external stakeholders require an understanding of the field, understanding learning situations,

effective networking within the field and extensive knowledge of regional, national and even global actors. It is widely acknowledged that students may lack networks and contacts, and this is where instructors come into play an important role (Spronken-Schmidt & Harland 2009). However, aligned with Clausen's and Andersson's studies (among others 2019; 2022) we take the role of 'facilitators' to engage the students to co-create and engage in the entire design process of bridging the gap to stakeholders and enhance the collaborative work with stakeholders. This of course might result in things not going as planned, but 'productive failure' (Kapur, 2008), can become a crucial component of the learning process for everybody, facilitators, and students alike, since learning situations are entanglements of people and things/situations (NLEC:316). Students solve tasks set by external stakeholders creatively and they do this as a co-creation with partners. Students need to be able to navigate in unknown contexts, solving wicked problems, use academic frameworks and be able to communicate results to external partners.

Results

Accordingly, these abovementioned initiatives provide students with valuable insights, for example that they are aware of their capacities to work creatively. Furthermore, we create learning spaces which enable students to enhance efficiency in decision-making through task focus e.g., elaborating reports and insights into sustainable implementation processes and sustainable transition. Students work with several of the SDGs, they develop collaborative project work, a process, which involves international partners, local regional and national authorities, fellow students and NGOs, and social movements. Focusing on SDG and social change taps into the ongoing discussion within the networked Learning field on "connections between learning and change in the world" (NLEC 2021:320) The tasks students work with and the experiences they gain through this work equip them with solid foundation for handling practical problems and real-life scenarios (and change), and it sharpens their focus on flexibility through creating knowledge which can be used in different contexts, thus preparing them better for post-university work life and improving their employability.

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