

# HELPING MANAGERS BECOME LIFELONG LEARNERS: WHAT DO ACADEMIC STAFF WORKING IN A NON TRADITIONAL PROGRAM THINK IT TAKES?

Iain Gardner, Caulfield General Medical Centre and  
Carlene Boucher, RMIT University

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of the experiences of academics using a range of teaching approaches to help managers develop lifelong learning capabilities. The participants indicated that a precondition for doing this work was a strong belief in, and personal practice of the philosophy of reflective practice and lifelong learning.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper reports one of the outcomes of a two year study of the experiences of ten academics teaching in the Graduate Diploma of Business (GDB), conducted by the School of Management at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. The course was originally designed as an innovative alternative to traditional management programs (such as the MBA) and explicitly aimed to help managers develop reflective practice and lifelong learning capabilities. The approaches used in the course included reflective practice teams, workplace-based action learning, micro-skills development, individual coaching, and the modelling of appropriate behaviours. This piece of research aimed to gain an understanding of the experiences of academics working in the program, and this paper focuses on the personal competencies that these academics thought were important in equipping them to help these students along the path to becoming lifelong learners.

## Research participants

The ten people who participated in this research project were all full-time academic staff in the School of Management at RMIT University. Five women and five men took part in the study, and the participants ranged in age from 29 to over 60 plus; with most being in the 31 to 50 year age group. The time that participants had been involved in teaching in the GDB ranged from being first involved in 1998 through to having been involved since the inception of the course twelve years before. All of the participants also taught in more traditional, knowledge and discipline based business courses (such as the MBA).

## Roles of the authors

Both of the authors had taught in the GDB for more than five years; running workshops and facilitating student learning teams. At the time the research was undertaken, Iain was the Course Coordinator and Carlene was Deputy Course Coordinator – both also coordinated a range of the subjects in the course. Iain undertook the research project and Carlene was one of the subjects involved in this study.

## METHODS

This research took the form of an ethnographic case study (Wilson, 1979) and used data gathered from a range of sources. The methods used included collection of historical documents and interviewing the course founders, semi-structured interviews with current staff, focus groups with staff working together on course events (such as workshops), and the keeping of a reflective personal learning journal by the researcher.

The ethnographic case-study approach was most suitable for this research project as it allowed the researcher to focus on one particular management course and the specific experiences of the academic staff teaching in it (Merriam, 1988). This case study was grounded in the real work of the academics, and was situated within the context of their everyday workplace.

## FINDINGS

Participants in this research identified a range of attitudes, skills and knowledge that they thought were required to be effective when attempting to help managers develop lifelong learning capabilities. They also described strong relationships between the various skills and competencies. As will be described in more detail

below, each distinct set of attitudes or skills was seen to be dependant upon the academic being competent in the preceding group. Attitudes, knowledge and skills build on one another and the result is a skilled and competent practitioner. Skills build on other skills and are dependant upon the set of beliefs and attitudes underpinning the way the skills are used. The resulting hierarchy of characteristics of effective developers of lifelong learners is outlined in Figure 1 below.

## Helpful attitudes

The participants in this study described a set of helpful attitudes which appeared to underpin the development of the skills required to help managers develop lifelong learning capabilities. The helpful attitudes included having a particular view of learning, being interested in teaching and learning, adopting the attitude of a learner oneself when teaching, holding particular views about power in the learning relationship, being flexible, valuing diversity, and possessing a sense of humour.

There was a strong commitment on the part of the research participants to the premise that to teach in this way, academic staff had to hold a certain set of beliefs about teaching and learning. They described a philosophy of teaching and learning similar to that reported in much of the adult learning literature; one based on a belief that learning should be both emancipatory and empowering (Apps, 1985; Cranton, 1994; Lindeman, 1961; Mezirow, 1990). They also believed that the philosophy of the course in which they taught needed to be underpinned by these same beliefs.

The participants appeared to closely resemble what Collins (1991) refers to as teachers who see education as a vocation. Their practice was informed "...by a theory of justice and social theories of action with which its practitioners can engage (p 118)".

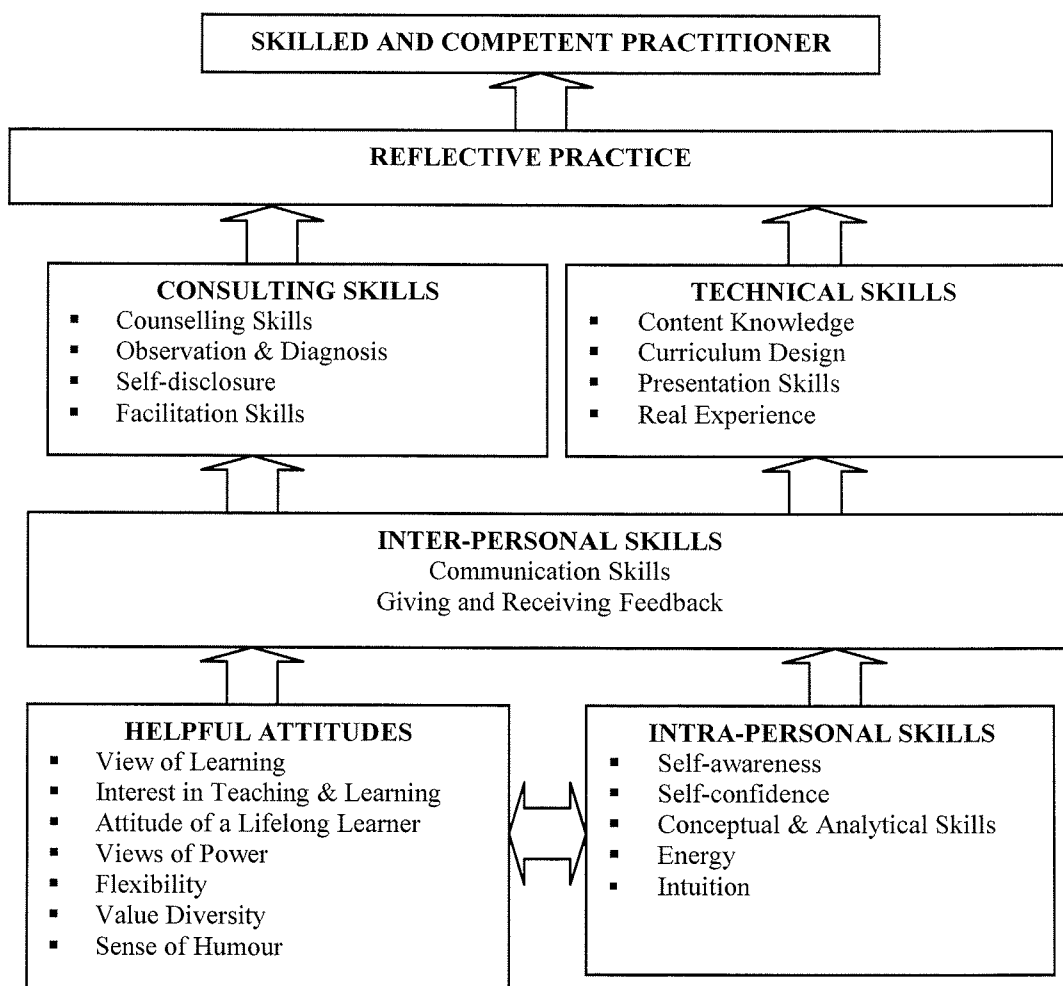


Figure 1: Hierarchy of characteristics of effective developers of lifelong learners

The academics in this study believed that they needed to adopt the attitude of a lifelong learner themselves. They also said that they were committed to a collaborative learning process where the links between theory and practice were actively explored. Ramsden (1992) refers to this as the desire that a teacher has to learn from students; especially in regard to the effects of their teaching and how they can improve. The teacher as learner perspective means that the teacher sees the learning process as a means to their own learning as well as to learning for the students. To be effective, the academics in this study also said that they required a certain predisposition to power; one where staff and students were seen to be more equal than is the case in the traditional classroom or lecture theatre. They needed to create a collaborative rather than authoritarian climate (Laird, 1985).

The data from this study also made it clear that in order to meet the varying needs of a wide range of students, and to facilitate the exploration of differences of opinions and ways of working, the academic had to be able to value and respect differences and diversity. A non-judgemental approach was required from the teacher to enable them to facilitate and model the valuing of diversity. The participants were also clear that a sense of humour was required if they were going to teach well and remain sane throughout the process. They indicated that humour played a dual role, contributing to the development of a fun learning environment, and also assisting them in maintaining balance and psychological health.

This set of helpful attitudes described above established the foundation upon which these academics said they based their skills and competencies. These attitudes drove their philosophy of education and shaped the way in which they taught. When the helpful attitudes were combined with well-developed intra-personal skills, they provided a strong foundation from which their inter-personal skills could develop and flourish.

### **Intra-personal skills**

The ability to manage oneself was seen to be of significance in the repertoire of teaching skills required to help the course participants develop themselves as lifelong learners. This interaction between a variety of characteristics is similar to the relationship described in the effective helper model developed by Egan (1975). He suggests that a strong relationship exists between helpful attitudes and micro skills in counselling. The major intra-personal skills identified by these research participants as being important to the teaching relationship were self-awareness, self-confidence, conceptual and analytical skills, energy and extroversion, and intuition.

The data strongly indicated that the teachers in this study thought that they required a high degree of self-awareness. They thought it was important to be able to distinguish what were their own issues and what were the issues of the students when facilitating learning processes involving strong personal reactions and high levels of emotion. This self-awareness was also seen to be intrinsically related to the teacher's ability to critically analyse their own teaching, and to engage in reflective practice and lifelong learning themselves.

The issue of self-confidence raises an interesting paradox which was highlighted by the research participants. A certain degree of self-confidence was seen to be required to allow the teacher to self-disclose, let go of the traditional formal power relationship and to be vulnerable with students. Implicitly however, most participants also identified that they had well-developed inner critics (Johnson, 1981) which enabled them to self-critique their work, and which drove them to continually try to improve the quality of their teaching. The emotional message was clear. They often experienced great doubts about their abilities, which fostered reflective practice and thus improved their teaching. This appeared to be linked to the perception that they were not experts and that they were more or less equal with the students (fellow learners).

In order to develop curriculum which was appropriate to the learning needs of students – to process and facilitate learning, and to critically analyse the practice and academic work of students – these teachers required well-developed conceptual and analytical skills. The teachers who took part in this study also said that they were required to entertain students enough to stimulate their desire to learn. This required a significant degree of energy. Participants identified that such sustained putting out of energy with a group of students was easier for people with a preference for extroversion (Briggs Myers, 1993).

The final skill identified by the participants was intuition. They thought that a teacher must have well-developed intuition, and demonstrate the ability to trust it and use it in the facilitation process. It was about knowing when to push students, and around what issues and when to move on to new issues. There has been considerable debate about what intuition really is (Goldberg, 1983). Is it an additional sense or is it merely the immediate and speedy recognition of data gathered from the other senses? Regardless of its exact nature, participants in this research identified that it was essential for them to be able to think quickly on their feet and to trust their intuitive reactions.

Intuition played an important role in the way the teachers in this study worked with their students. The role of intuition when helping managers develop lifelong learning skills was demonstrated in their descriptions of how they worked. It was said to be of greater importance in this type of teaching because of the lack of structure, the low level of predictability in the teaching process, and the demands on the teacher to alter the learning agenda to meet changing needs as they emerged. The participants reported that these intra-personal skills provided the foundation for inter-personal skills to develop and resulted in them being more confident about helping managers develop the capacity for lifelong learning.

### **Inter-personal skills**

The participants were very clear that developing close relationships with students was vital, both in terms of facilitating learning, but also because they found such relationships satisfying and motivating. The major inter-personal skills identified by the participants which helped to foster such relationships were communication skills and the ability to give and receive feedback. Solid communication skills were identified as being key. 'Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education' (Freire, 1990, p 81). This form of management development involved the academics providing quality feedback to students, and also required that the teachers be able to receive feedback from students and colleagues.

### **Consulting skills**

A group of skills were identified by participants, including counselling skills, observation, diagnostic skills, self-disclosure, and facilitation skills; and these have been categorised as consulting skills. These skills build on the skills previously mentioned in the lower levels of the hierarchy and provided the academics with the ability to manage facilitation and the processing of relationships with individuals and groups.

All of the participants said that they used counselling skills frequently in their teaching. Farquharson (1995) acknowledges the similarities between counselling and teaching skills when commenting on the skills shown by counsellors who also teach. Participants identified that two particular skills required by academics attempting to develop the lifelong learning skills of managers were observation and diagnosis. Leinhardt and Greeno (1986) suggest that "...at the same time as undertaking a current activity, an expert teacher acquires and takes note of information, which may be generated incidentally. This is then saved, revised and used in future situations (p 21)".

In contrast to this, participants in this research stated that they used the data generated during activities to make changes to the learning process in the here and now, as well as reflecting on it for future practice. This fits more closely with the view of Schon (1987) with regard to 'reflection in action'. If engaging in reflection in action, the academic is constantly monitoring the learning process and engaging in what several of the participants referred to as 'reflection on the run'. The observation skills used in the workshop setting allowed the academics to optimise learning by catching what Havinghurst (1970) refers to as 'teachable moments'. The educators involved in this study relied on keen observation skills and the ability to diagnose learning needs and opportunities as they arose.

One consulting skill identified in the research which has had little apparent coverage in the education literature was self-disclosure. Participants identified that they used self-disclosure frequently to highlight examples of difficulties, to share and model behaviours, and to acknowledge when they did not know something. The apparent lack of discussion of this topic may be an outcome of the dominance of the 'teacher as expert model' in traditional teaching (Laurillard, 1993). If teaching is about the giving of knowledge rather than about forming relationships, then self-disclosure becomes irrelevant. The counselling literature does, however, provide evidence of the value of self-disclosure in establishing and maintaining relationships, and for challenging blockages in growth and development (Carkhuff, 1980; Carroll, 1996; Nelson-Jones, 1995).

When helping managers develop lifelong learning skills, the closer and more intimate relationship with students, combined with the spontaneous nature of the workshop process, allowed the teachers to show more of themselves. In a similar way to counselling, these academics used self-disclosure to encourage self-exploration on the part of the students, to normalise emotional experiences, and to challenge blockages in learning and development (Corsini, 1979). A significant difference for the academics was that often the self-disclosure occurred publicly in a workshop, rather than in the relative safety of the one-to-one counselling relationship. In this way, the academic were making themselves vulnerable on a much larger scale. This may have accounted for some of the feelings of vulnerability that participants talked about during this research.

These academics were required to facilitate a variety of learning processes with students. They identified that this required a high degree of skill in facilitation. Zemke (1995) suggests that facilitation skills are the most important skills for anyone working in adult education.

## Technical skills

In addition to the skills and attitudes mentioned above, participants also identified a range of technical skills they required to be effective. The technical skills identified included content knowledge, curriculum design, and presentation skills. Participants also identified that having real experience in the field being taught was of utmost importance. They said that their ability to ground theory in real-life practice resulted in greater learning for their students. Halliday and Soden (1998) write that this is particularly important in practice-related subjects. Participants in this research advocated that both they and their students tell the stories of their experiences. They thought that the use of real life stories heightened the learning.

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

It was evident that the participants all believed that to be effective at helping managers develop their lifelong learning capabilities, the management educator also needed to be a reflective practitioner. They said it was vital to have the ability to reflect on and critically analyse their practice as teachers. They were committed to their ongoing professional and personal development, and used reflection as a key way to access their reactions, and to monitor their performance.

Reflection was important as it allowed these academics to 'reality check' their own perception of situations and their performance. It provided them with a valuable way of engaging in quality improvement. For the participants in this study, the ability to reflect appeared to be dependant, less on a set of specific skills, but more on an attitude which predisposed them to critically analyse their practice. This relates closely to the paradox mentioned earlier for the need for non-traditional educators to have well-developed self-esteem; yet at the same time be required to have enough self-doubt to be critical of the work that they are doing.

These academics had turned to teaching lifelong learning skills after having experienced the power of this approach at some stage in their own learning. In this way, they had learnt the value of reflection in the learning process, and as they saw themselves as life-long learners and teachers as learners, they continued to make use of the reflective process. They had moved from being reflective learners to becoming reflective scholar-practitioners.

## CONCLUSION

This model of characteristics describes a hierarchy of attitudes, skills and competencies which, the participants in this study believe, combine to produce a skilled and competent educator who is able to use a variety of tools to help people develop lifelong learning skills whilst enrolled in a management education program conducted in an academic setting. Each level of the hierarchy is strengthened by the lower level and it requires mastery at each level to develop overall mastery as a teacher of lifelong learning. Absolutely pivotal to developing the capacity to help others develop as lifelong learners, is a commitment to one's own continual development and constant engagement in reflective practice. For these scholar practitioners, reflective practice took two forms, reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action.

## REFERENCES

- Apps, J. W. (1985). Improving Practice in Continuing Education. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Briggs Myers, I. (1993). Introduction to Type : A Guide to Understanding Your Results on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Gainesville: CAPT.
- Carkhuff, R. (1980). The Art of Helping IV. Amhurst: Human Development Press.
- Carroll, M. (1996). Workplace Counselling: A systematic approach to Employee Care. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Collins, M. (1991). Adult Education as Vocation: A Critical Role for Adult Educators. London: Routledge.
- Corsini, R. (Ed.). (1979). Current Psychotherapies. Itasca: F.E. Peacock.
- Cranton, P. (1994). Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Egan, G. (1975). The Skilled Helper. Monterey: Brooks/Cole.
- Farquharson, A. (1995). Teaching in Practice: How Professionals Can Work Effectively With Clients, Patients and Colleagues. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Freire, P. (1990). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Continuum Publishing.
- Goldberg, P. (1983). The Intuitive Edge: Understanding and Developing Intuition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Halliday, J., & Soden, R. (1998). Facilitating changes in lecturers' understanding of learning. Teaching in Higher Education, 3(1), 21-36.
- Havinghurst, R. (1970). Developmental Tasks and Education. New York: McKay.

Johnson, D. (1981). Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness and Self Actualization. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Laird, D. (1985). Approaches to Training and Development. Reading: Addison Wesley.

Laurillard, D. (1993). Rethinking University Teaching. London: Routledge.

Leinhardt, G., & Greeno, J. (1986). The cognitive skill of teaching. Journal of Educational Psychology, 78 (2), 75-95.

Lindeman, E. (1961). The Meaning of Adult Education. Montreal: Harvest House.

Merriam, S. (1988). Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Mezirow, J. (Ed.). (1990). Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Nelson-Jones, R. (1995). Counselling and Personality: Theory and Practice. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin.

Ramsden, P. (1992). Learning to Teach in Higher Education. London: Routledge.

Schon. (1987). Educating the reflective practitioner: towards a new design for teaching and learning in the professions. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wilson, S. (1979). Explorations of the usefulness of case study evaluations. Evaluation Quarterly, 3 (3), 446-459.

Zemke, R. (1995). Adult learning: What do we know for sure? Training, 32(6), 31-40.