# Teaching Methods

Student Skills Portfolio Project in the Social Sciences at Flinders University
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## Outline:

The Student Skills Portfolio Project has been established and run within several disciplines of the Faculty of Social Sciences during 2000. The WWW-based transferable skills portfolio provides a mechanism to prompt students to think about and record transferable skills they are developing within discipline-based topics. As such, it encourages students to: monitor their own skills development; develop a portfolio of learned skills from which they can draw upon in employment applications; and, more readily appreciate the value of their tertiary education. The portfolio project has been well received in those topics in which it has been trialed, but it is clear that it works best when included as a small part of formal topic assessment. The project is available for application across the University and the School of Humanities (Faculty of Education, Humanities, Law and Theology) has indicated that it proposes to adopt the project in several topics from 2001.

## Context:

The Faculty of Social Sciences is one of four major academic organisational units at Flinders University, and incorporates 12 schools and departments:
- American Studies
- Asian Studies and Languages
- Commerce
- Economics
- Geography, Population and Environmental Management
- History
- Political and International Studies
- Psychology
- Social Administration and Social Work
- Sociology
- Women's Studies

The Faculty has approximately 3300 students, 160 academic staff and 56 general staff and offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

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## Main features:

The transferable skills portfolio project is intended to help students think about and record their skills development in such a way that it will be useful to them in their search for employment and other community roles.

- This project is intended to help students to:
- Identify 'transferable skills'.
- Recognise those experiences they encounter on- and off- campus that enable them
- to develop transferable skills.
- 'Map' their own skills development through the course of both their degree and
- their extracurricular activities.
- Monitor their skills development so that they can identify their strengths and
- shortcomings and thereby:
  - capitalise on areas in which they already have strong capacity, and
  - improve in those areas where they feel the need.
- Produce evidence to demonstrate their skills development (for referral when
- seeking references, or when applying and interviewing for a job).

## What are transferable skills?

Generic (or general) transferable skills are those skills, abilities and personal attributes which can be used in a wide range of activities, both in and out of employment, and that are not specific to subjects studied.

Although many transferable skills exist, most can be summarised under four main headings:
- communication and presentation skills (oral, written and graphic);
- teamwork or interpersonal skills (e.g. negotiating, listening, sharing, empathising);
- management or organising and planning skills (including self management skills
- such as integrity, honesty and ethical behaviour); and
- intellectual and creative skills (such as problem solving and 'thinking beyond the square').

Skills that are developed in a specific subject area at university (e.g. sociology, psychology, archaeology) may be **transferred** from that context into another (e.g. another topic or a community role or a employment-related task).

Let us look at the example of writing. The ability to communicate effectively in writing is an example of a transferable skill area that will develop through different kinds of exercises at university. These could include those assignments that require students to write essays, fieldwork reports, laboratory reports, or text for posters. Whilst students may develop their ability to communicate in writing in a particular context (for example, within their particular disciplinary area or within the context of

university assignments) students' various abilities *can be* transferred across (used in) several contexts. Students will probably find that they need to, or will, develop these skills to progressively higher levels in their work and community life to produce, for example, policy papers, annual reports, published articles, or books and to present their ideas at conferences, board meetings or public forums.

**Why are they important?**

1. Transferable skills *empower* students to use and effectively apply the specific knowledge they develop through higher education. For example, expertise with 'MS-Excel' or 'SPSS' enables students to use and present discipline-specific data effectively.
2. Transferable skills *enable* students to perform different work or professional roles from those for which they have been educated. For example, well-developed transferable skills might allow the social work professional to move from social work practice into hospital policy.
3. Transferable skills are *mutually supportive*. For example, interpersonal skills (such as how well a person listens) are often closely connected to their ability to communicate effectively (such as how much impact their written or spoken word has on others).

For these reasons, transferable skills are valued highly by *universities* and by the *communities* of which students are a part. They are among the qualities and attributes treasured by an educational tradition which endeavours to provide a broadening of horizons, preparing graduates for a critical, aware and responsible appreciation of the world. Indeed, according to the Flinders University's *Education and Research Policy 2000*, Flinders courses are expected to include reference to generic capabilities that are to be gained as well as reference to the capabilities associated with individual disciplines. Transferable skills are also valued highly and expected of graduates by *employers*.

**What do employers say about transferable skills?**

Employers often differ as to the skills they expect of graduates as well as the way they prioritise those skills. Many major employers also have their own competency-based system for recruitment, in-house training and promotion decisions. For example, in its recruitment and promotion decisions, one large, well-known firm operating in Australia focuses on six 'Personal Qualities', in particular:

- *personal impact*. This means having presence and credibility, making a strong impact, being good with words, and having polished communication skills and influence.
- *relating to people*. Are you an effective relationship builder and networker, who can empathise, consult, listen, respect, give consideration, use tact and diplomacy, who can promote consensus and is concerned about team spirit?
- *self motivation*. The self-motivated person is someone who readily tackles demanding tasks, willingly offers to get involved, and seeks out new/extra responsibilities.
- *quality orientation*. Are you someone who takes pride in the quality of your work and are seen by others to have integrity and business ethics?

- *Adaptability.* This refers to the ability to respond appropriately to continually changing circumstances. It suggests a person who welcomes suggestions for doing things differently and is regarded by others as being open to change.
- *Resilience*. This means being able to cope with stress, work under pressure, show stamina and tenacity whilst remaining stays cool headed.

**What transferable skills do students have?**

Some students may be among those fortunate people who have a well-developed sense of their own abilities and possess the capacity to make these known to other people. However, because transferable skills are often developed implicitly within university topics, some students and graduates do not realise the extent to which they have developed skills through study and other aspects of university life (e.g. part-time work, extracurricular activities). Very often, this problem becomes most evident when graduates respond to requests for information from prospective employers at the end of their studies.

*The transferable skills portfolio project is about resolving that problem.*

## How to create a transferable skills portfolio

There are four main tools which are needed to create a skills portfolio:
- a *transferable skills menu* (a guide to developing skills at Flinders)
- three templates for developing a portfolio

There are also some worked examples of the templates to guide students.

This information is available on the Skills Portfolio web pages at http://www.ssn.flinders.edu.au/skills Students can download the appropriate pages to store their information.

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**1. Transferable skills 'menu'**

There are a number of activities which students may undertake, both at Flinders University and outside - for example, in the workplace, as a community volunteer, in a social or sports club and within the family - from which they can draw to create their own transferable skills 'portfolio'. The experiences they encounter on- and off-campus will enable them to develop these skills both at a basic and advanced level. It is important to remember that development of a portfolio of skills is a lifelong process. Students will not encounter all the experiences required to develop skills in each topic or extracurricular activity they undertake. Students' skill development will occur over time, through the many activities they undertake, and in developmental stages, from the attainment of a basic level of competence in particular skills to more advanced achievement.

The 'menu' of transferable skills elaborates those skills Flinders University expects of its graduates. The menu outlines what those skills mean and suggests some activities ('sources of opportunity') in which students might develop them. Students will be able to draw on these 'sources of opportunity' to demonstrate (provide evidence of) their own achievements in their skills portfolio.

It is important to note that the menu is neither comprehensive nor prescriptive. It is meant instead to be a guide to help students reflect on the level of competence they have achieved in each of the four main skill areas.

**Transferable skills themes**

The 'transferable' (or 'generic') skills which Flinders University students develop through their Higher Education topics and extracurricular activities (e.g. paid or volunteer work and club membership) can be grouped into four broad 'themes'.

**The transferable skills 'menu'** contains information about the 17 transferable skills expected of Flinders graduates grouped under four themes:
- Communication/presentation skills
- Teamwork or interpersonal skills
- Management or organising and planning (including self-management) skills
- Intellectual and creative skills

The menu discusses what the skills mean and suggests some curricular and extracurricular activities ('sources of opportunity') in which students might develop them.

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**Personal topic diaries (progress files):**
Students use these files to record their reflections on the skills they believe they have developed in each topic they undertake throughout their degree. They use the diary file as they work through each of their university topics (e.g. COMM 1001, GEOG 1002) to enter notes on their perceptions of their skills development, perhaps in dot point form.
They can include
- information to support the claim that they have developed the identified skills;
- provide a short description of exercises or assignments contributing to their improvement; and
- provide personal reflections on their learning (e.g. some frank reflection on whether the IT skills they developed were at a basic or advanced level).

Once students have finished the topic, they can use their notes to produce a final summary statement of their skills development across the four theme areas identified above. When students have finalised each topic statement, the file can be printed out and signed by the topic coordinator or tutor. By signing the personal statement, the coordinator/tutor will simply be indicating that the student has prepared a plausible representation of their learning in that particular topic. When the diaries produced for each topic are gathered together, it will provide students with a portfolio of evidence and reflection on their personal transferable skills development that they can use in various ways to secure employment, community work and so on (e.g. by drawing on sections of it to demonstrate to a prospective employer that they have developed and practised a particular set of skills).

**An index to the topic diaries.**
The index will provide students with a quick guide to their topic diaries for evidence of their skills development. To create this simple index of their personal skills development, students use the blank index form to tick off those skills they believe they have developed in each topic they have studied. They do this after their diary entries are finalised. For example, a tick under the topic DVST 1001 for the skill 'capacity for cooperation and teamwork' should lead you to find evidence of your skills development in that area in your diary of DVST 1001.

**Records of extracurricular skills development.**
Students use these in the same way as their topic diaries to record extracurricular activities they undertake (e.g. within a social club, though part-time work or through volunteering) and the contribution they make to the development of your transferable skills.

The transferable skills portfolio that students' develop as a result of this exercise will probably heighten their appreciation of the learning they do while at university by making them more acutely aware of the broad range of skills they develop. Employer groups suggest that it is also likely to improve their chances of finding employment. For instance, in a curriculum vitae, a letter of application, and in an interview, students can draw from well-documented and well-thought-out evidence and examples to substantiate their claims that they have developed particular skills.

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Referees will also be able to prepare a strong case on students behalf if they are provided with clear evidence of the skills students possess. This is not to suggest however that the portfolio is something to be bundled up and sent to prospective employers and referees in its entirety. Instead, it should be used as a reference tool to help students think about how they might satisfy the selection criteria for jobs and from which they can draw examples and evidence to support claims they make in any letter of application for employment.

**Student responses to the transferable skills project**

The transferable skills portfolio project has received positive feedback from students. For example, students who completed the project found that it helped them identify and summarise skills learnt at university, provided an opportunity to reflect on their skill strengths and weaknesses and made them think more critically about courses and what they could offer. In addition, students found the project useful for constructing curriculum vitae and in job hunting. Half of the students who completed the project in 2000 claimed that they would continue to develop their skills diary in the future.