Supporting Students to Develop Attitudes to Learning that Strengthen Their Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Employability Credentials

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Issue, aims and approach

Universities are naturally concerned that their students are able to secure appropriate employment when they graduate, a concern which is shared by the U.K. government. Accordingly, ‘employment of graduates’ is one of five performance indicators for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England and Wales, and as a result universities are increasingly focussing upon the employability credentials of their students (Boden and Nedeva 2010). There are a number of different perceptions of employability, however the activity presented in this paper draws on the definition offered by Yorke (2006:8), who defines graduate employability as follows:

“... a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.”

Yorke and Knight (2007:158) additionally suggest that employability should be considered in terms of the attributes of students in the following four areas:

- powers of understanding (evidenced by gaining a good degree)
- application of skills (generic and subject-specific)
- metacognition (capacity for reflection)
- efficacy beliefs and what they describe as “other personal qualities”

The activity presented here focuses specifically on the fourth element mentioned above – efficacy beliefs and other personal qualities. Bandura (1995:2) describes self-efficacy as the “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations”. Self-efficacy beliefs can influence factors such as motivation and commitment levels as well as an individual’s willingness to take on difficult tasks.
Yorke and Knight’s perspective on the other personal qualities required by students is that students should have the confidence that they can “make a difference” (Yorke and Knight 2007:160). This for example could be typified by having an internal locus of control – i.e. the belief that they are in control of their own destiny (Rotter 1966: cited in Buchanan and Huczynski 2004:850) and a malleable (rather than fixed) self-theory – i.e. the belief that an individual can take action to enhance their own competence (Yorke and Knight 2004). In essence, students need to believe that by working hard they are able to enhance their own abilities and potential outcomes.

The aim of the activity is to help students develop attitudes to learning that will strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs and hence their employability credentials. Assistance for students to develop helpful self-efficacy beliefs is especially relevant to graduates from post-1992 universities. These students tend to be from lower social classes and research has suggested that they tend to do less well in terms of their employment outcomes (Moreau and Leathwood 2006). Furthermore Tomlinson (2007) found that even within older universities, students from less affluent backgrounds appeared to have lower aspirations and so were more likely to “settle for less”.

The activity has been piloted with students participating in a Year 2 Career Development module, which is mandatory for students on various Business courses at Coventry University. There are typically around 250 students on the module, and one of its aims is to improve their employment prospects.

Whilst no prior analysis of the self-efficacy beliefs of the students was undertaken, the likelihood is that many of them were unaware of the importance of self-efficacy and, consequently, students with unhelpful self-efficacy beliefs were unlikely to be aware that they may have had a ‘problem.’ Placing this in the context of the ‘four stages of learning model’ (sometimes attributed to Maslow – for example see Crosbie 2005), these students would be at Stage 1 – i.e. ‘Unconscious Incompetence’, as illustrated below:

![Diagram showing the four stages of learning model](image-url)
(Adapted from Crosbie 2005:48)

It is clearly important to help students to start moving through these stages of learning by making them aware of self-efficacy and the impact that their individual beliefs can have on their employment outcomes (as well as their degree classification). Furthermore, knowledge of the importance of self-efficacy is arguably akin to what Meyer and Land (2003:1) describe as a threshold concept i.e. “a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress.” In other words it is only through becoming aware of their own self-efficacy beliefs, and the impact that these can have on their employment prospects, that students will be able to maximise the development of their employability attributes.

**Approach / Outline of the Activity**

The approach draws on inquiry-based learning principles. In contrast to the traditional tutor-centered lecture this activity enables students to find out for themselves the importance of self-efficacy and the impact their own beliefs can have on their employability outcomes.

Participating students are asked to undertake a review of the self-efficacy literature. The activity takes place over a two week period as follows:

**Week 1**

Students are asked to complete a brief ‘attitudes to learning’ questionnaire in their seminar groups. The questionnaire includes 3 self-efficacy related statements and the students are asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement on a 1 to 5 Likert rating scale. However, the primary objective of the questionnaire is to raise student awareness of self-efficacy as a concept rather than using it as a measurement tool. (A specimen questionnaire and accompanying Briefing Sheet are attached as Appendix A).

The students are asked to complete their questionnaires individually – without being given any further explanations or introductory information. Once completed, the students hand the questionnaires back to the tutor.

They are then introduced to the concept of self-efficacy and asked to undertake a review of the concept in the related academic literature. (They are then given a briefing sheet which contains a few key references as a starting point but ultimately the onus is on them to find relevant articles). The students are asked to work in teams with the aim of presenting their findings to the rest of the seminar group the following week.
Week 2
The students present their team’s findings to the rest of the seminar class. It is hoped that they will have appreciated from their research the importance of helpful self-efficacy beliefs, and how their own beliefs can have a bearing on their individual outcomes – not only in terms of degree classification but also employment opportunities.

Finally, they are asked to complete the same questionnaire they completed the previous week.

Evaluation

Benefits
The main objective of the activity is to help students to appreciate the importance of self-efficacy beliefs so that those with less helpful beliefs can recognise for themselves that they may have a ‘problem’ - i.e. they should have at least reached Stage 2 (‘Conscious Incompetence’) of the 4-stage learning model outlined above. Furthermore, if, as a result of undertaking the research, the students do learn the value of helpful self-efficacy beliefs and start to adopt more positive attitudes and behaviours as a result, the activity would have helped them move towards at least Stage 3 – ‘Conscious Competence’.

The anecdotal evidence from both staff and students after completion of the pilot activity suggests that it has helped students to develop an understanding of the importance of self-efficacy. For example, some groups summarised their presentations in the second week of the activity by stressing the positive correlation between effort and achievement. Additionally, many of the students indicated that they very much enjoyed undertaking their self-efficacy research as they found it both interesting and enlightening.

In particular, the activity appeared to make students really think about what they needed to do to improve their own attitudes to learning, as illustrated by the following quotes from participants during the second seminar activity:

“I feel I doubt myself more than I should. I feel with help I could learn to appreciate what I am good at more. I think I need help with motivating myself at tasks I find tedious.”
“I believe I doubt my capabilities and need to work on having a better self belief... I need to concentrate on how to perform successfully and not dwell on every negative outcome – and not to give up so easily.”

The benefits of the activity for less confident students in terms of helping them improve their employability related credentials was also acknowledged by the Module Leader, who commented as follows:

“The self-efficacy activity has been very useful for emphasising several important messages to students. In particular it has been useful in encouraging the least confident students to take control of their own career development.”

The students were also asked as part of the activity to comment on whether there was anything more they would like their tutors to do to help them work on their self-efficacy beliefs. Again the responses from the students suggested that they would welcome and appreciate further guidance and support from their tutors in developing positive attitudes towards learning. This is an important learning point from the pilot (although outside of the scope of this paper) as thought now needs to be given to follow up activities that would give the students the opportunity for further development - with the ultimate objective of them achieving Stage 4 of the Learning Model (unconscious competence) when helpful self-efficacy attitudes become almost ‘second nature’.

**Drawbacks**

A key concern with the pilot activity was the likelihood that not all students would fully engage with the group research task – i.e. some ‘free riding’ was probably inevitable. Consequently, the pilot activity was undertaken very near the start of the module when students tend to be at their most eager. Additionally, the opportunity to observe the findings of their peers should at least have enabled any free riding students to gain some appreciation of the importance of self-efficacy.

The other drawback apparent from the pilot activity was the limited use of the questionnaire for research purposes. As discussed earlier, the questionnaire was designed mainly as a tool to encourage the students to engage with the concept of self-efficacy rather than as the basis for measuring any improvement in their scores. Nevertheless, a sample of 31 of the completed ‘before’ and ‘after’ questionnaire responses was also analysed. These showed a very slight increase in the average total ‘after’ score compared to the total ‘before’ score but this was not statistically significant (a paired T-test was
found not to be significant at a 95% confidence level: T-Value = -0.45, P-Value = 0.654). This was perhaps as a result of students realising what ‘good’ students would be expected to think and hence providing similar answers in both weeks (particularly as they were asked to include their names on both the ‘before and after’ questionnaires). Consequently, if the activity is repeated in the future, it would be worthwhile redesigning the questionnaire to make it more suitable for statistical analysis - perhaps by increasing the size of the rating scale and incorporating additional questions that more effectively measure the participants’ underlying self-efficacy beliefs.

**Opportunities for further research**

It would be interesting to extend the research into the impact and outcomes of the approach in the following two ways:

- Gather more qualitative data by conducting semi-structured interviews.
- Carry out longitudinal research by monitoring the achievements of the participating students during the rest of the academic year.

**Transferability**

This approach could be used across many different courses and modules – although clearly it is most relevant to modules focussing upon self-development activities.

**Summary**

Overall it is argued that this activity can produce significant benefits. In addition to the potential for improved pedagogy, it supports efforts to improve student employability, which is a key priority across the HE sector. Also, with its emphasis on students researching into the meaning of the concept of self-efficacy, it aligns well with the current agenda for linking teaching and research (see, for example, Jenkins, Healey and Zetter 2007).
References


