

Defining, Assessing and Measuring Generic Competences

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

David D. Curtis

Abstract

This thesis reports an investigation into generic skills, a class of skills that appear to be broadly applicable to many work, social and civic contexts. Two major generic skills schemes were proposed in Australia, namely the key competencies (Australian Education Council. Mayer Committee, 1992) and the employability skills initiative (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia, 2002). The implementation of these schemes is reviewed and several difficulties in their implementation are identified. The most significant issues are thought to be the definition and assessment of these skills.

The issue of definition occurs for generic skills as a class of constructs and arises in relation to each skill proposed as generic. Generic skills could be perceived as representations of either general intelligence or as particular kinds of intelligence. They could also be seen as components of competence. The representation of generic skills as aspects of competence, involving the deployment of cognitive and metacognitive processes, appears to be a fruitful approach to the investigation of generic skills.

In addition to defining generic skills as a class of constructs, each generic skill requires definition. For the research reported in this thesis, one commonly recognised generic skill, problem solving, is selected for investigation. Problem solving is defined as a set of processes that are deployed in identifying, defining, planning, executing, monitoring and evaluating problems and their solutions.

The second major issue identified in the implementation of generic skills schemes is assessment. A body of literature on assessment is reviewed. Assessment is found to serve two major sets of purposes, namely summative and formative. A variety of methods has been used in the assessment of generic skills, most of these methods having been designed for the summative assessment of generic skills achievement. There would appear to be a role for assessment methods that seek to enhance generic skills performance, and this is a focus of the research reported here.

Two studies are undertaken into the assessment of problem solving. In the first, the definition of problem solving, based upon notions of competence, is used to develop and validate a problem solving assessment instrument. The instrument is used as one element of a particular assessment process. In this process, students assess their own problem solving performance on routine assessment tasks that they undertake within their courses. They submit their work, including both the

substantive course-related tasks and their assessment of their problem solving performance on that task. Their self-assessment is validated by their lecturer and they receive feedback on that assessment. The results of the first study indicate that the problem-solving assessment instrument, based on a cognitive theory of problem solving, does provide a valid basis for the assessment and measurement of problem solving performance, although some improvements to the instrument are foreshadowed.

In the second study, a revised version of the problem solving assessment instrument developed in the first study is used. In this study, students use the problem solving assessment tool on a series of course-related assessment tasks over an academic year, receiving feedback on each assessment. The purpose of this study is to test the proposition that repeated assessment and feedback cycles might lead to improved problem solving performance. Evidence for such improvement is reported.

It is concluded that existing course-related activities can be used as vehicles for the development of students' problem solving skills. The development of generic skills (problem solving in this instance) would appear to depend upon two elements of an assessment regime. First, the assessment target needs to be defined in terms of an underlying construct that is operationalised through an assessment tool that focuses student attention on its key elements. Second, the development of problem solving proficiency is related to repeated assessment and feedback cycles, that is, to the implementation of a formative assessment approach.

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Contents

Declaration	iii
Abstract	v
Acknowledgments	vii
Contents	ix
Tables	xiii
Figures	xv
Acronyms	xvi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
A lifelong learning perspective	1
The focus of the thesis	4
Structure of the thesis	8
Chapter 2: The Evolution of Generic Skills in Australia	15
The impetus for generic skills	16
The changing requirements of work	16
Definition of terms used to describe generic skills	21
Labels for generic skills	21
The qualifiers	22
The descriptors	24
An interim position on terminology	29
Review of major generic skills schemes	29
The emergence of generic skills in Australia	30
Quality of Education Review Committee	31
The Finn Review Committee	32
The Mayer Committee	33
Implementation of key competencies	38
Summary of the evolution of generic skills in Australian education	67
Critical issues in implementing generic skills	69
Definition and selection	70
Assessment, reporting and certification	74
Summary of generic skills developments	79
Chapter 3: Conceptions of Generic Skills and Models of Problem Solving	81
Generic skills as psychological constructs	81
The problem of definition	82
Generic skills as manifestations of intelligence	88
Generic skills as competences	99
Generic skills, intelligence and competence	104
Conceptions of problem solving	106
Models of problem solving	107
Problem solving processes	117
Summary statements	119

Chapter 4: Purposes, Forms and Outcomes of Assessment	121
Assessment defined	121
Goals and purposes for assessment	122
Feedback	125
Self-assessment	128
Frameworks for defining performance standards	131
Bloom's taxonomy	136
The SOLO taxonomy	139
From standards to measurement	140
Criteria for evaluating assessment approaches	142
Validity and related constructs	142
Reliability and related constructs	144
Objectivity	146
Feasibility	147
Examples of generic skills assessment	149
Summary evaluation of potential assessment methods	158
Implications for assessing problem solving in the current study	162
Summary statements on assessment	163
Chapter 5: Summary of Research Themes and a Strategy for Their Investigation	169
Critical issues in implementing generic skills	169
Defining constructs	169
An assessment model	172
Towards an assessment tool	174
Research questions	175
Answering the research questions	177
Chapter 6: Analytical Methods	179
Measurement	179
A brief history of measurement in the social sciences	179
Classical test theory	183
The Rasch measurement model	184
Constructing Measures	194
Evaluating change over time	196
Multilevel modelling	197
Missing value imputation	202
Chapter 7: Development and Testing of the Problem Solving Assessment Instrument	205
Purposes of the study	205
Recruitment and characteristics of participants	206
Selection and development of instruments	206
The Problem-Solving Inventory	207
Development of the Problem-Solving Assessment instrument	208
Converting a conception of problem solving into a measure	209

Administration of the Problem Solving Assessment instrument	214
The assessment of problem solving	216
Data collection and analysis	217
Results	218
The Problem-Solving Inventory	219
The Problem Solving Assessment	221
Validation study	236
Student evaluation of the Problem Solving Assessment	238
Discussion of results	241
The Problem-Solving Inventory	243
The Problem Solving Assessment Tool	243
Summary	245
Chapter 8: The Growth in Students' Problem Solving Performance over Time	247
Selection of research sites and students	249
Information for participants	251
Analytical methods	256
Tertiary Skills Assessment	256
Analysis of the Tertiary Skills Assessment	257
PSSAT calibration and scaling	261
Changes in problem solving performance over time	265
Approaches to assessing growth	266
Exploratory analyses of problem solving development	266
Multilevel models for problem solving development	272
Summary and discussion of key findings	292
Chapter 9: Summary, Discussion, Implications and Conclusions	295
Summary	295
What is known about generic skills?	295
Towards a definition of generic skills and of problem solving	298
Understanding the possibilities and limitations of alternative assessment methods	300
Developing a problem solving assessment tool	301
Discussion	305
Limitations	305
Implications for practice and further investigation	308
Conclusions	312
References	315
Appendices	341
Appendix 1: Ethics Approvals	343
Approval from Flinders University	344
Approval from the Department of Education Training and Employment	345
Appendix 2: Overseas Generic Skills Schemes	347
The United States	347
Developments in the United Kingdom	354

Developments in Canada	357
The DeSeCo Project	358
Developments in Europe	360
Implications for Generic Skills in Australian Education	365
Appendix 3: Examples of Generic Skills Assessments	369
Standardised assessment	369
Common assessment tasks	377
Performance assessment	379
Teacher judgment	384
Portfolio construction	386
Appendix 4: The Problem Solving Inventory	389
Appendix 5: The Problem Solving Assessment	393
Appendix 6: Student Evaluation of the Problem Solving Assessment	401
Appendix 7: Recommended E&IT Assessment Tasks	403
Appendix 8: The Problem Solving Skills Assessment Tool (PSSAT)	407
Appendix 9: Teacher Information Package	409
Appendix 10: Student Information Package	423
Appendix 11: Results of Analyses of Multiple Imputation Data Files for Self-Assessed Problem Solving	443
Appendix 12: Results of Analyses of Multiple Imputation Data Files for Teacher Assessed Problem Solving	447

Tables

Table 1: Terms commonly used to describe the generic skills learners are expected to acquire	22
Table 2: Generic skills schemes by country.....	31
Table 3: The final seven key competencies	36
Table 4: The Australian Industry Group skills taxonomy.....	49
Table 5: Employability skills framework.....	53
Table 6: Relationship between key competencies and key skills from the employability skills framework	54
Table 7: Summary of key competencies developments in Australia, 1985 to 2001	68
Table 8: Summary of employability skills developments in Australia, 2002 to 2008.....	69
Table 9: SCANS proficiency levels.....	75
Table 10: Sternberg’s model of successful intelligence	97
Table 11: Process-based models of problem solving	118
Table 12: Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives – cognitive domain	137
Table 13: Comparison of problem solving processes with Bloom’s taxonomic levels.....	138
Table 14: Performance levels of indicators using the SOLO taxonomy	140
Table 15: Calfee’s comparison of externally and internally mandated assessment	150
Table 16: Summary of the application of evaluation criteria to prospective assessment methods	160
Table 17: Performance levels of indicators using the SOLO taxonomy	212
Table 18: Course modules and recommended problem solving assessment tasks	215
Table 19: Results of principal components analysis of PSI responses	221
Table 20: Correlations among PSI components following Promax rotation	221
Table 21: Assessors who participated and tasks used in problem solving assessment	223
Table 22: PSA Major Processes, indicators and abbreviations	223
Table 23: Frequencies of Problem Solving Assessment indicator performance levels.....	224
Table 24: Rotated factor solution for the Problem Solving Assessment	225
Table 25: Results of reliabilities analysis for the complete PSA scale.....	226
Table 26: Estimates of PSA indicator locations and performance level thresholds	231
Table 27: Questions and summary of responses to an online student evaluation survey	241

Table 28: Indicator numbers, labels and text in the PSSAT.....	254
Table 29: Item parameters for the TSA interpersonal understanding scale	259
Table 30: Item parameters for the TSA critical thinking scale.....	259
Table 31: Item parameters for the TSA problem solving scale	260
Table 32: Summary statistics for the three TSA scales.....	261
Table 33: PSSAT indicator thresholds (Deltas) and indicator fit statistics	262
Table 34: Comparison of TSA sub-scale scores of those who continued in the study with those who dropped out.....	265
Table 35: Descriptive statistics for problem solving assessment by occasion	267
Table 36: Correlations between TSA sub-scales	280
Table 37: Equations for the models of problem solving performance.....	283
Table 38: Results of models of self-assessed problem solving performance	284
Table 39: Deviance values for models of self-assessed problem solving performance	285
Table 40: Results of models of teacher-assessed problem solving performance	292
Table 41: Possible arrangements for the delivery and assessment of employability skills.....	385
Table 42: Electronics and Information Technology recommended assessment tasks	403

Figures

Figure 1: Structure of the thesis.....	8
Figure 2: The structure of Carroll’s proposed model of intelligence	89
Figure 3: Category probability curves for MSAI Item 2	189
Figure 4: Category probability curves for MSAI Item 9	190
Figure 5: Relationship between raw scores, Rasch scaled scores and the standard error of person estimates for the MSAI Anger Intensity scale	193
Figure 6: The process of developing a measurement scale for problem solving performance	210
Figure 7: Frequency distributions of individual competences (above the horizontal axis) and performance level thresholds (below the axis) along the problem solving performance scale	229
Figure 8: Fit parameters (Infit MS) of the Problem Solving Assessment.....	230
Figure 9: Delta thresholds for PSA indicator performance levels.....	232
Figure 10: Thurstone thresholds for PSA indicator performance levels	233
Figure 11: Distribution of problem solving performance measured on the PS500 scale.....	234
Figure 12: Individual’s problem solving scores in rank order, showing standard errors of estimates	235
Figure 13: Standardised indicator location differences between E&IT and AWT students.....	237
Figure 14: Using the PSA to record and judge evidence of the student’s selected performance level.....	253
Figure 15: PSSAT indicator thresholds (Deltas) and standard errors.....	263
Figure 16: Differences in indicator difficulty estimates between self assessments and lecturer validation	264
Figure 17: Trellis plots for students’ self assessed problem solving scores over three occasions (N=42).....	270
Figure 18: Composite plot of students’ problem solving self assessments by occasion showing an interpolated ‘best fit’ curve (N=42)	270
Figure 19: Trellis plots for teacher assessed problem solving scores over three occasions (N=42)	271
Figure 20: Composite plot of problem solving teacher assessments by occasion showing an interpolated ‘best fit’ curve (N=42).....	271
Figure 21: Representation of relationships between models in the sequence of models developed to explore growth in problem solving performance	276

Acronyms

Names and titles are used in full at their first reference. Subsequently, the following acronyms are used.

ABS	The Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCI	The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
ACER	The Australian Council for Educational Research
AiG	The Australian Industry Group
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
AVCC	Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (now Universities Australia)
BCA	The Business Council of Australia
BHERT	Business Higher Education Round-Table
CBI	The Confederation of British Industry
CRESST	Center for Research in Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (USA)
CTT	Classical Test Theory
DEET	Department of Employment, Education, Training
DEETYA	Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DeSeCo	Definition and Selection of Competencies (OECD project)
DEST	Department of Education, Science and Training
DETE	The (South Australian) Department of Education, Training and Employment
DETYA	(Australian) Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs
GSA	Graduate Skills Assessment
IRT	Item Response Theory
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
NCVER	The National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NQC	National Quality Council
NTB	National Training Board
NTQC	National Training Quality Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD program)
SACE	The South Australian Certificate of Education
SCANS	Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (USA)
TAFE	Technical and Further Education (often, College of...)
TST	True Score Theory
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United States of America