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ACADEMIC COACHING FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSFERABLE SKILLS THROUGH WORK-BASED LEARNING IN A SINGAPORE UNIVERSITY

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Introduction: Context and Focus

Work-based learning programmes, sometimes termed internships or work attachments, represent an integral part of many university degree programmes in Singapore where there is a strong discourse of preparing graduates for the workplace. The creation of universities with an applied learning pathway, such as the Singapore Institute of Technology, signalled a focus to provide higher education that is strongly linked to the industry needs (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2012).

Employers have perennially emphasised the importance of transferable skills in their employees through surveys such as those by the World Economic Forum (2020), LinkedIn (Anderson, 2020), and Udemy (Hourani, 2020). These listed top skills in demand, many of which are transferable skills, such as problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and teamwork. Transferable skills, also termed “generic skills” or “employability skills,” are competencies that workers may acquire from one context and apply in another context (Sawin, 2004). Transferable skills have been gaining importance in a world that is fast-changing and disruptive, where technical skills may quickly become obsolete. All of these factors prompted the Singapore government to set up a new agency, SkillsFuture Singapore, to look at a core skills framework for this purpose (SkillsFuture Singapore, 2022).

As an educational developer who had opportunities to work with both academic and workplace supervisors of students on work attachment, I was intrigued by the question of how students could better develop their transferable skills when they are on a university work attachment. In this reflection I discuss the use of academic coaching as a tool for partnership with students as part of a university’s work-based learning programme.

Work-Based Learning as an “Open” Curriculum

While it is possible to “teach” transferable skills in the university curriculum through communication courses and involvement of students in team projects, I concur with Feldmann (2016) that a work-based learning opportunity within the university curriculum would represent the most authentic environment for the students to acquire and develop their transferable skills. Saunders and Machell (2000) likened a work-based learning programme to a rehearsal for work as students apply what they learnt at the university to solve real-world problems, acquiring transferable skills in the process. The Singapore Institute of Technology’s integrated work-study programme (IWSP) was one such programme where students spend 8 to 12 months at the workplace in a job scope relevant to their degree (Ng et al., 2020).

Work-based learning programmes like these typically have a generic learning outcome for students, and these outcomes align with a broader holistic education outcome of the degree programme and, often, the university’s graduate attributes. The university has a contact point for the students, an academic supervisor, who is in contact with the students on a regular

basis and ensures the university's work-based learning outcomes were achieved. I was part of the team that developed a coaching programme to help our university's academic supervisors acquire basic coaching skills for helping students achieve these work-based learning goals. A formal coaching programme would however not be possible with workplace supervisors at this point given the constraints and varied needs of the companies. This was what led me to explore interventions that are simple and flexible yet would achieve the goal of coaching students at the workplace.

In my interaction with workplace supervisors, I discovered that the specific work-based learning outcomes have also been shaped by the experience and values that the supervisors bring to the programme, and the demands and culture of the company where the students were attached to. In other words, the work-based learning curriculum could be described as an "open" curriculum that includes the university's requirements, the company's needs, and the workplace supervisor's personal expectations. Although the student sometimes has the choice of the company they want to be attached to, from my perspective their involvement with the learning outcomes is weak or non-existent and a missed opportunity for partnership for their own educational goals.

Coaching as a Partnership

Coaching is often used in the human resource development context as a means of training at the workplace. It can be defined as a "partnership" through a "creative" process between a coach and a client (International Coaching Federation, 2022). Academic coaching, where coaching is applied in a higher education setting, is an emerging area and represents a means of partnership with the student. As opposed to mentoring where a mentor shares experience and provides advice, a coach asks questions to draw answers from the student. An analogy could be the difference between direct instruction and inquiry-based pedagogy – the former being more teacher-centred whereas the latter is more student-centred.

A starting point for the coaching relationship can be a question asking the student what their learning goals for the work attachment are. As a simple intervention, this process of involving students in co-creating the learning outcomes was introduced to work supervisors in a small-scale qualitative study in which I was involved. Students were asked to list up to five learning outcomes to include both technical and transferable skills, and the work supervisors then added to the list only if skills were not already mentioned by the student. By having the students speak first, supervisors invite students to take greater ownership of the goals.

We managed to recruit a small group of nine workplace supervisors from various engineering or technical fields to participate in this intervention. Regardless of their backgrounds, there was a sense of excitement on their part to participate in this. For those who are new to coaching, they agreed on the approach to listen more to the student voice and give them a greater say in their learning goals. Even supervisors who have years of supervision experience found this approach to be refreshing as they have thought from previous experience in education that they ought to be leading the students and providing all the answers that the students would learn from. Supervisors who had prior experience with executive coaching had not immediately thought that they could apply this to students. The warm response from the work supervisors was an encouraging start to the intervention that lasted from 3 to 6 months. While it was left for the work supervisors to determine what happens after the goals were set, most supervisors reported there were follow-up

conversations after the first meeting on the co-creation of learning outcomes. The nature of the follow-up was not mandated, nor were any follow-up meetings required of the workplace supervisors. This provided additional assurance that once the work-based learning outcomes co-creation session started the process, the follow-up conversations would be in place.

In semi-structured interviews after the intervention, work supervisors reported increased clarity regarding their role and the learning process. They were able to purposefully design work around the students' goals and gave relevant feedback to help the students grow in terms of the transferable skills that they hoped to develop. Many supervisors were also pleasantly surprised at the ideas that students could come up with when they directed less and listened more. Supervisors also reported better communication with their students and greater satisfaction in supervision.

However, the implementation was not without its challenges. As work supervisors could be busy people, the intervention was made as simple as possible – in this case, it was an exercise of co-creating learning outcomes in a single session. Some supervisors were used to “telling” and had to go against their instinct to just provide answers when the students were stuck. This was when I shared my own experience of coaching students in a study skills workshop that coaching is a skill that requires practice. It is through practice that one can listen more intently to the underlying issues, probe deeper into the thinking process, and explore more creatively various options. Nevertheless, the response was to acknowledge the difficulty in coaching and occasionally revert to “giving suggestions” when the students were completely clueless.

The Singapore classroom culture could be described in Confucian terms, where teachers and students have defined roles – a student's role is to listen to the teacher without questioning. Seow (2019) described this as the setting of “walls” by students to perpetuate the idea of unequal status and being satisfied with being passive learners than to speak up. In this respect, the work supervisors also suggested that students do need to reflect more and learn to speak up. While this is something that I personally experienced from my years of being a student and subsequently an educator, I also believe that mindsets are gradually changing as higher education moves towards more active and student-centred learning.

The process of coaching challenged the traditional Singapore culture, and hence, practice is needed both for the work supervisor and the student. To enable a more equitable partnership, the idea of learning and unlearning is thus crucial (Cook-Sather, 2023). For work supervisors, it was about learning to listen and unlearning the structure where a teacher needed to provide all the answers. For students, it was about learning to reflect and speak up and unlearning the focus that education was about grades and providing the right answers. In this small-scale intervention, it was particularly heart-warming to note that the supervisors who had a better satisfaction were those who had embraced this mindset shift after years of supervision experience.

While today's education system had shifted somewhat to a more student-centred approach, more effort is needed in light of the current culture. At the same time, we have to be careful not to swing towards the other end, as direct instruction and giving advice is still needed. If we see work supervisors as teachers of transferable skills, coaching could be viewed as another tool in the teacher's toolkit. Indeed, in our study, many work supervisors also reported that they were more comfortable to use a mix of coaching and mentoring in their interaction with students, than just coaching alone, such as when students are still completely clueless due to their own blind spots.

Conclusion

From my experience of this simple intervention of having workplace supervisors co-creating work-based learning outcomes with students, this was a starting point for coaching conversations that could add value to the students' development of transferable skills. I see academic coaching as a useful tool to involve students in partnership, as students reflect on these work-based learning outcomes and on their development of transferable skills.

To harness the benefits of coaching and address its challenges, a mindset shift is required in the light of the overarching culture that is very teacher-centred where instructions and advice were given, to one that is student-centred, where the student voice is accorded importance. This is not to say that the Confucius teaching about respecting structures is an issue, but rather reframe to have the teacher earn respect from students not through "status" alone but through students feeling that the teacher has added value to their learning. Confucius being the great Teacher of the East would have used a wide range of skills to cultivate wisdom in his students, many of which were based on deep conversations with the student. In the same way, coaching conversations can be that vehicle to better understand the student and to draw out the best in them. Academic coaching would work well with an area of continual development such as transferable skills, where employers value and universities strive to develop in their graduates.

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