

Enacting Business Education Employability Skills Through a UDL Lens.

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Abstract.

This article introduces the notion of synergies between employability skills embedded within the university curriculum and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. It draws on a previous study which examined the disjuncture between espoused and that of actual teaching and assessment practice of employability skills within the business curriculum. While that study produced a typology to aid in the development of these skills, this paper now considers how a UDL perspective might make the teaching more relevant to individual students and in doing so more inclusive. We argue that employability skills applied through a UDL lens is particularly appropriate since they have a common goal – to create expert learners. As defined by the UDL guidelines (CAST, 2018) such learners are purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, as well as being strategic and goal-directed. While this is one example of UDL underpinning effective teaching and assessment practice, it also reflects a growing awareness around the potential of UDL within higher education curriculum design.

Keywords: Curriculum design; Employability; Universal Design for Learning (UDL).


1. Introduction.

Developing students' employability skills is an important focus within the higher education curriculum. Employability skills include such things as collaboration and teamwork, communication, innovation, problem solving, critical thinking, decision making, leadership, global citizenship, personal development and management, emotional intelligence, and digital literacy (Bhatti et al., 2023). They allow students to demonstrate the application of disciplinary knowledge within the workplace. For example, marketing students working together to develop and present a sales campaign would inherently be evidencing several of these skills such as teamwork, collaboration, and communication skills. Designing that task from a UDL perspective could better meet the needs of underrepresented students (including low SES, remote students, those living with disability, indigenous, non-native speaking) by offering choice and flexibility, and in doing so benefit the entire cohort.

There is growing evidence that a range of strategies should be put in place to give students the opportunity to develop these skills throughout the curriculum (Orr et al., 2023). Although there is still much ambiguity about which skills should be addressed, whether it should be the role of the teaching academic to foster employability skills through teaching and assessment, and uncertainty about how integration should occur. This disjuncture has led to inconsistency and unsystematic practice (Cotronei-Baird, 2020).

In response to this disjuncture, Cotronei-Baird's (2020) study offered an employability skills typology (see Table 1). It presented the four main ways academics have integrated students' employability skills development within the business curriculum. This guides academics to review their teaching and assessment practice within a disciplinary context.

Table 1: Employability skills typology. Adapted from Cotronei-Baird (2020, 2017).

Teaching practice	Examples	
Assess employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Integrate employability skills development into the assessment tasks and instructions •Include employability skills in assessment criteria and rubrics •Include employability skills in written and verbal feedback 	High/ Direct
Facilitate activities to apply employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Give students opportunity to practice and demonstrate the application of employability skills through classroom activities and pre-class task/activities •Facilitate activities that can be used to enable students to demonstrate employability skills •Give students opportunity to apply employability skills to real life cases, data and examples 	
Demonstrate application of employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Use case studies to demonstrate employability skills •Use data or examples relevant to your discipline, subject, and students, to demonstrate employability skills in practice and workplace/profession •Show how to apply employability skills to real life examples, case studies, data, workplace/profession 	
Discuss employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mention the importance and relevance of identified employability skills in the workplace •Explain the employability skills that are linked to the particular roles/positions relevant to your students and discipline/subject 	

This employability skills typology has been successfully used within business faculties (Dyki et al., 2020). However, there is an opportunity to extend its reach through the application of UDL (CAST, 2018). This article proposes that by doing so, students may develop skills better suited to their own professional aspirations while at the same time academics may approach teaching in an inclusive manner.

2. Applying principles of UDL.

UDL is an effective way to anticipate diversity since it asks that educators be inclusive, flexible, and supportive through course design, teaching, and assessment (Rao et al., 2021). While acknowledging the various universal design frameworks used within education, including Universal Design for Instruction (Scott et al., 2003), this paper draws specifically on the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) UDL framework (2018). This is because the three basic principles: multiple means of 1) engagement, 2) representation, and 3) action and expression, offer a pedagogical lens for academics wishing to be inclusive (McGuire & Scott, 2006). Furthermore, its goal is to create expert learners (CAST, 2018); a characteristic often associated with employment and broadly speaking, a life skill. In this case, each principle provides opportunities to make employability skills explicit within the curriculum, while also offering a personalised learning experience.

By providing multiple means of engagement students become purposeful and motivated. Arguably the prospect of a rewarding career is the purpose of many courses and this in turn motivates students. The principle calling for multiple means of representation produces students who are resourceful and knowledgeable - traits with clear alignment to employability. The final principle asks that students be given multiple means of action and expression when it comes to their learning so they may become strategic and goal-directed. This principle suggests that students should have agency to make choices which complement their career aspirations. To illustrate this point, teaching practices noted by Cotronei-Baird's typology (2020) have been considered within the context of each of the three UDL principles.

2.1 Multiple means of engagement.

With the first principle: "*multiple means of engagement*," academics are asked to consider the "*why*" of learning. By doing so, the affective networks of the students' brain are activated (CAST, 2018). As noted by Cotronei-Baird (2020), academics routinely engage with students through in-class discussions about employability skills. The typology describes the practice of discussion as being an "*indirect*" or "*low*" level of employability skills integration. But it is still valuable since the discussion of employability skills during class time is foundational for other learning activities that directly integrate employability skills development within practice. Most importantly, by approaching discussions about employability skills from a UDL perspective,

students have increased ownership regarding opportunities to discuss the relevance of such skills to their coursework and future. For example, students might be given the option of sharing their thoughts regarding the importance of employability skills during class through paired conversations or in group settings. They might also participate asynchronously using a discussion board. The academic could attract student interest by offering choices as to which employability skills are discussed, particularly those relevant to their coursework or to their future interests. That interest might be maintained by asking them to make small but regular contributions to the discussion board. The academic could continue to motivate students by providing timely feedback throughout the semester.

2.2 Multiple means of representation.

With the second principle: “*multiple means of representation*,” academics are asked to consider the “*what*” of learning. By doing so, the recognition networks of the students’ brain are activated (CAST, 2018). It is fair to assume that academics would demonstrate what employability skills are in-class to their students. Cotronei-Baird (2020) also suggests that demonstrations of employability skills are often provided by academics, but the practice is done inconsistently. In comparison to discussions, the typology identifies demonstrations as having a higher level of application towards employability skills integration. Demonstrations which include real-world case studies, realistic problems, or actual data, contribute to the value of these experiences. Demonstrations are an obvious fit within this principle since they may be provided to students in different ways, such as written scenarios, short videos or through interviews with industry professionals in a range of classroom settings, including the large and/or online lecture. While varying the student experience in this way offers different options of perception, it may also help students make meaningful connections to background knowledge and to the relevance to their coursework, as well as to their personal view of life after university. As a result, students gain a deeper level of comprehension regarding the application and significance of the employability skills.

2.3 Multiple means of action and expression.

With the third principle: “*multiple means of action and expression*,” academics are asked to consider the “*how*” of learning. By doing so, the strategic networks of the students’ brain are activated (CAST, 2018). This speaks to the higher, more impactful activities within the

Cotronei-Baird typology (2020); being facilitation and assessment of employability skills. Facilitation includes opportunities for students to practice these skills. One way to approach this might be through roleplay. Students could be given scenarios which include realistic dilemmas they might experience as professionals. In-class roleplays could involve a small number of students while being critiqued by others. This would be a way to offer both constructive peer feedback and feedback from the academic. Roleplays might also happen online with an additional asynchronous component such as contributions to a discussion board while assuming an alias. Such activities would enable students to practice and acquire a range of employability skills. Although this is just one example as to how opportunities for practice might be provided to students, it draws on several of the UDL checkpoints for this principle. They include the potential use of technologies, multiple means of communication, and the possibility of providing novel solutions to authentic problems.

Assessment is closely aligned to this principle since it uses executive brain functions including goal-setting, planning, monitoring progress, and the managing of information and resources. While UDL directs students to set their own goals, academics can provide opportunity and support so students may do this in a way which is challenging yet realistic. For example, an accounting academic could include a team contract as part of the assessment so students might demonstrate communication, negotiation, and time management skills. In addition, giving students choices about assessment topics would allow them to make connections to their own professional aspirations and to be assessed on a range of employability skills. Likewise, a choice of format could allow them to best express themselves while once again considering those aspirations. For example, within business disciplines, the choice between written reports or presentations (in-class or online) would be appropriate. Assessment rubrics could play an important role throughout this process by supporting the provision of timely feedback as employability skills are formally assessed and as students gain insight into their achievements.

This short article has reflected upon synergies between teaching employability skills and UDL's goal of creating expert learners. There are many possibilities for combining UDL principles with learning activities such as those identified by this employability skills typology. As such, future research will examine the potential use of UDL guidelines and checkpoints by academics wishing to assist students in accessing, building, and internalising employability skills. That research will also include the student voice.

3. Conclusion.

This paper suggests that universities should apply UDL principles to ensure that important initiatives are inclusive. More specifically, it proffers that UDL can guide business academics to embed employability skills within their teaching and assessment practice to produce expert learners in an inclusive manner. The implications for enacting employability skills from a UDL perspective points to practical teaching and assessment strategies while also broadening the conversation about UDL within tertiary education.

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