

Academic and Employability Skills

BMSW 4001_LON

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Introduction

This reflection is focused on the knowledge acquired during the module BMSW4001 on academic and employability skills. Personally, the most significant attributes which will help in my professional practice, acquired and perfected as a result of this module, are soft skills, especially adaptability, academic writing, public speaking, cover letter writing and critical thinking. Adaptability was one of the skills I intended to develop as per my Personal Development Plan (PDP). In conducting this reflection I considered appropriate to apply Kolb's learning cycle which was developed in 1984 and consists of four stages of learning. Kolb (1984) focuses on the value of experiential learning and the 4 stages of learning are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. I consider Kolb's model of learning to be appropriate for my experience as I observed my learning style falls under one of the four styles built by Kolb, namely assimilating (i.e. combining abstract conceptualisation and reflective observation). A conclusion regarding what was learnt and further development directions will also be made.

Abstract conceptualisation

In this section I will present the abstract concepts as understood as a result of this module and of my own individual academic research.

Adaptability

As previously mentioned, this was a skill I considered necessary to develop as per my PDP. In this module, I have learnt how to analyse my own skills and how to make a PDP, to help me assess my development. Scholars regard adaptability as a key skill for future career success (O'Connell et al., 2008). Tariq et al. (2011) see adaptability as a source of competitive advantage. It is generally argued that human resources can be a source of organisational competitive advantage and Tariq et al. (2011) conceptualise the fact that this is highly due to employee adaptability to organisational change. In basic terms, organisations are constantly impacted and influenced by changing external and internal forces which have a direct effect on performance and the organisation's ability to achieve its goals. Moreover, organisations are also faced with competition, and if we were to apply Porter's Five Forces model in relation to any industry it would become obvious that for the majority of industries, with a few exceptions, the threat of new entrants (and thus new competitors) is medium or high. Tariq et al. (2011) seem to believe that one essential way for companies to maintain

competitive advantage is employee adaptability, and a similar idea is set forth also by O'Connell et al. (2008).

Moreover, Nansubuga and Munene (2013) believes that work environments often become turbulent due to these forces (internal and external) which push towards continuous change, and in this context adaptability can only be achieved through reflective practice. In other words, employees need to reflect upon the change, its implications and the effort needed to adapt, in order to make the change easier. It is a natural reaction of human beings to be resistant to change and, depending on one's personality traits, education, and even gender (O'Connell et al., 2008), as well as other intrinsic personal values, some people are more adaptable than others. However, Schulze and Pinkow (2020) seem to consider that adaptability can be taught through proper leadership and the creation of "adaptive spaces" (Schulze and Pinkow, 2020, p. 39). Therefore adaptability as an abstract concept can be seen as the employee's ability to embrace change and have a positive response to change generating forces which occur regularly in an organisational context.

The cover letter

As per Morgan's definition, "a covering letter is a professional business letter which provides an employer with an introduction to an accompanying CV." (Morgan, 2017, p. 339). In this module, a valuable lesson I learnt was about the concept of a cover letter, as well as its importance for employment. In my opinion, before Week 3 when we were taught about the cover letter, I believed a CV was sufficient to show a potential employer all the skills an applicant has. However, I have since learnt that it is the cover letter that can properly reveal the soft skills which employers seek so much in the current employment market. I believe now a properly written cover letter can make the difference between selected candidates and discarded CVs.

According to an article published by one of the largest employment platforms in the UK, Indeed.com (2020), there are companies who value cover letters a lot, while others do not. The importance of the cover letter is that it allows the candidate to elaborate their story before an interview is even set. This does not mean that the candidate should write their life story, as employers are expecting the candidate to present their personal account about their skills and the value they can bring to the company using those skills, as well as their ambitions and the most important lessons learnt from previous experience which recommend them for the job.

Academic writing

Another important lesson I can draw from this module is the value of academic writing for my professional development. The most important component in academic writing is, in my opinion, research, and the ability of putting together a reasoned response to a certain question. Defazio et al. (2010) indicated that academic writing also promotes academic literacy and enables students to develop their critical thinking, as well as their ability to formulate a response in a professional manner. Defazio et al. (2010) also add that the ability to formulate written answers that show argument and reason is deeply rooted in the cognitive domain. I agree to this statement, as I believe that academic writing can develop both my research skills and my ability to put together different pieces of information in order to form an argument.

Prahmana (2017) also argues that research-based learning is essential to enhance students' academic skills and critical thinking, but it has a similar effect on faculty members as well, helping them further develop their ability to validate theories and produce justified statements. I find this very important because I consider Prahmana (2017) manages to convey the fact that research is an essential part of career development and learning, and that the learning process is not limited only to school or university. This module also helped me pay more attention to the use linking adverbials in my writing, and I learnt that there is such thing as an overuse of these words, which is more common in L2 English students (Appel and Szeib, 2018).

Public speaking

In terms of public speaking, I always felt a certain level of anxiety especially out of fear of being misunderstood. During the second term I learnt not only how to develop a proper PowerPoint presentation, but also how to conduct my discourse and how to speak in order to be understood. Ibrahim and Devesh (2019) argued that public speaking is a very important employability skill and that public speaking anxiety can have a negative effect on students' employability. For this reason, Docan-Morgan (2015) argued that public speaking education is essential in universities because it teaches students how to communicate clearly, concisely and succinctly in order to inform and persuade the listeners.

I also learnt that body language is important when making a public presentation, and that anxiety related gestures are a form of non-verbal communication that may give the others the impression that the presenter is unsure about the information conveyed or that he or she is exhibiting disbelief in his or her own statements (Docan-Morgan, 2015). This has a negative

impact on the presenter's persuasion abilities. A natural, relaxed and confident presenter has a higher chance of persuading others and successfully transmit their message.

Critical thinking

Another skill I learnt is critical thinking and problem solving. The concept of problem solving as defined in the employment context of the 21st century is, according to Rahman (2019), as a crucial cognitive process which involves systematic observation and critical thinking. Critical thinking is an individual's ability to conceptualise, apply logic reasoning, devise a strategy, think analytically, make decisions and synthesise abstract concepts that help solve a certain problem. In other words, problem solving involves an entire cognitive process which employs analytical and critical thinking in order to use or apply abstract concepts as a means to solve a problem.

It is argued by Snyder and Snyder (2008) that critical thinking and problem solving can be taught to students through instruction as well as through practice. Snyder and Snyder (2008) believe this can be achieved both at an individual level but also in teams, as students can engage in critical thinking together by brainstorming ideas. Again, this has taught me that problem solving is related as much to individual reflection as it is to team work. Yu et al. (2014), completes the idea of teaching problem solving skills set forth by Snyder and Snyder (2008) with a study which proves that context-based learning can help teach problem solving to students in universities. According to Yu et al. (2014) context-based learning is a process which involves teaching students how to embrace and adapt to the problem solving process needed to solve any problem. This is presented in the context of the study of mathematics, but the process can be applied in every day problem solving situations.

Reflective observation

In order to better understand the abstract concepts learnt, it is necessary to reflect upon their applicability in the context of employment, in a work environment. As defined by Foucault (1992), critical self-reflection is one's ability to analyse and think differently about abstract concepts rather than legitimating what others think, in other words taking concepts at face value. This definition is given by Foucault as a general advice which can be applied in all aspects of life, including education. Thus, in order to critically reflect upon the learnt concepts, I considered it is necessary to imagine their applicability in a work environment.

First and foremost, the ability to create a proper cover letter can distinguish you as a candidate. I had the chance to read some cover letter examples and I became familiar with

what employers do not want to see in a cover letter and I observed how this seemingly simple element of a job application can help you obtain an interview. At the beginning of this module I was nearly convinced all I needed for employment was a well-presented CV, but I feel a cover letter can be of significant help. Also, when learning about academic writing, I observed the differences in language between semi-formal, formal, and academic pieces. The written word may be a cognitive ability of many, but perhaps the most valuable lesson learnt here was how to provide someone with a written argument, a well-researched answer to their question. I consider this is also a valuable skill in the work environment. Furthermore, by engaging in critical thinking and self-reflection, I realised I am able to objectively assess my strengths and weaknesses and build a realistic development plan that can help me grow professionally, as well as personally. The challenge of learning so many things about employability and what employers seek for in a candidate changed my perspective. This change was rapid, therefore I needed to adapt to it fast, which is why I consider this module also helped me develop my adaptability skills. Finally, learning about public speaking helped me observe the damage anxiety related to this action can do in a work environment, and helped me learn more about being natural and confident when making a presentation.

Conclusion and future development

In summary, this module has helped me learn important aspects of employment from an employer's perspective, become more adaptable and surpass my public speaking fears. Self-reflection is, in my perspective, one of the most valuable skills I have learnt, and I consider it has determined me to be able to critically evaluate my development. Future objectives for me would be to continue to enhance the skills acquired during this module and apply them in practical situations in the workplace, as well as in future academic endeavours, in order to enhance my achievements and achieve growth in my career. Furthermore, I will continue to critically reflect upon my development, thus measuring progress, as well as new opportunities for improvement.

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