

Embedded teaching and learning of key competencies: can we have too much of a good thing?

John Hamer, AlphaPlus Consultancy

Topics: P4 - Quality assurance for key competencies initiatives

Keywords: embedding, transferability, problem-solving, assessment

Presentation required (20 minutes)

Abstract

'Embedded' is a term that has become both widely used and widely applauded in relation to teaching and learning strategies for developing generic competencies. There is, however, often ambiguity about what it might mean in practice - other than at the most general level of bringing together competencies and and vocational or subject teaching and learning. How, if at all, does it differ from notions of 'situated', 'contextualised' or 'integrated' approaches? It is a term with considerable potential for misunderstanding and over-inflation.

This ambiguity echoes similar uncertainties there have been about the nature of key competencies. It has led some commentators to argue that a fundamental problem has been the lack of any theoretical basis underlying the choice and definition of the competencies themselves. Prescription, it was claimed, had outrun conceptualisation.

This missing theoretical framework underpinning competencies has largely been provided by initiatives such as the DeSeCo Project. But embedding as an approach to their development has not received the same degree of scrutiny.

This paper considers five issues:

- (i) If embedding strategies are to have optimum impact they need careful consideration and a high level of sensitivity at both the planning stage and in the actual teaching process. This is especially so given the range of key competencies that have been identified and the marked conceptual differences between them. Some - for example, the ability to organise one's own learning and to use initiative - have wider applicability and are necessarily developed in a greater variety of contexts than others. Problem solving seems to run up against the need for subject/technical specific knowledge and understanding at a fairly early stage. Consideration and analysis needs to be given to how these differences impact upon embedded approaches.
- (ii) Certain competencies - particularly those related to numeracy, literacy, language and communication - demand that the learner has something solid to build on before embedding becomes an appropriate - or even possible - strategy. It raises concerns about matters such as timing, learners' preparedness and prior learning, and degree of contextualisation.
- (iii) Central to key competences is the notion of the transferability of learning. One widely accepted condition for transferability of a set of competencies is the individual's awareness of them . There are possible risks, therefore, attached to embedding competencies if it is employed to the extent that learners lose sight of them. By making them explicit, learners are likely to be better placed to modify their use and to deploy them in a range of settings.
- (iv) Embedded strategies pose peculiar problems for the assessment of competencies. They raise a particular dilemma. We appear to have to accept either that 'true' embedding validates claims that demonstration of a subject or technical specific competence is sufficient evidence of acquisition of the generic competence; or, the paradox that in order to assess and record generic competencies reliably we need to dis-embed them from the context in which the teaching and learning have taken place.
- (v) Although work on embedding frequently stresses the need for some flexibility of approach, the implementation is almost always the embedding of competencies or basic/key

skills into a vocational or other programme whose structure, if not its delivery, remains unchanged. An alternative paradigm might be to think in terms not of embedding but rather of unearthing. The challenge would then become to find ways not of putting things into programmes but of drawing out what generic competencies must be there and making them explicit.