The role of card sorts in employability learning

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Summary

Card sorts are well-established as a tool for self-reflection on interests, skills and values. They can be a helpful learning resource for promoting self-awareness, articulation of personal attributes, and personal development/career planning. They also have a valuable role in stimulating discussion on the place of 'employability' in the curriculum. A range of card sorts is explored. Some of the key websites which cover the topic are listed.

Keywords

Biography

Val Butcher has been involved in careers guidance and careers education in schools, colleges and universities since the mid 1960s.

She is now Senior Adviser for Employability with the Higher Education Academy (formerly the LTSN Generic Centre), a Fellow of NICEC (the National Institute of Careers Education and Counselling) and a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Employability, University of Central Lancashire.

What is employability learning?

Recent research and development undertaken by the HEFCE-funded Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) has brought employability learning from the periphery to the mainstream of pedagogic debate and has demonstrated that it can be delivered through programme design and assessment processes.

The Centre for Employability at the University of Central Lancashire has defined employability as *'a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.'*

This definition embraces a whole range of curricular initiatives, many of which may be explored on the LTSN Generic Centre/ESECT website at **www.ltsn.ac.uk/esect**.

The aim of this paper is to invite teachers in higher education to explore what 'employability' means to them in relation to their student body, type of institution, and the perceived relationship between their academic discipline and the world of work. How this may be approached will be considered in detail later.

The development of card sorts as a learning resource

An early reference to card sorts was made by Tyler (1961) when, in line with the development of personal construct theory in vocational counselling, he introduced an occupational card sort. This built on the earlier vocational interest inventories, but was much more under the control of the individual learner. Participants were invited to sort occupations physically (listed on cards) into those they liked, disliked or were neutral about. Recognition of the place of 'self-estimates' in producing results that could be used in vocational counselling became more common (Athanasou, 1992). www.div17.org/vocpsych/resources/cardsort.pdf

During the last three decades of the 20th century, the use of card sorts for individual career development and planning increased significantly in North America, Australia, and in the UK. Some examples:

- Hopson and Scally introduced self-reflective card sorts into the UK in 1984 (Hopson and Scally, 1984). During the preceding five years, the Counselling and Career Development Unit (CCDU) at the University of Leeds had developed and piloted card sorts for self-reflection on interests, skills, and values.
- Purdue University offers a vocational card sort adapted from John Holland's vocational exploration and insight kit: https://www.cco.purdue.edu/ [Enter 'sorts' in the site search box.]
- Florida State University offers seven types of card sort to students. Topics include 'College Majors Card Sort' (to enable students to choose the academic courses they wish to take), 'Occupational Values', and 'Activities': http://www.career.fsu.edu/ [Enter 'sorts' in the site search box.]
- There are commercial companies in the USA which sell such self-reflective materials to individuals for their personal use in career development and planning. 'The Third Quarter of Life Card Sort' – www.adultmentor.com – is a commercial card sort 'designed to help people become more aware of important issues they may face in the third quarter of life, and it helps them build on current strengths to design a future that will truly work for them.'

An indication of the breadth of pedagogic issues to which card sorts may be applied is explored in *Educational 'sorts': A strategy for teaching and learning*, by Judith Rasband:

http://www.itaaonline.org/ITAAnew/Proceedings2000/thurs/014.html

Her main points are:

- Educational 'sorts' are a stimulating, effective, and economical strategy for teaching and learning;
- 'Sorts' promote self-expression, comparative understanding, assessment and application;
- Student interest and attention are extremely high when working with 'sorts'.
- Attention to detail is stimulated;
- Students report that 'sorts' are their favourite interactive exercise experience;
- 'Sorts' promote congruence between theory and application.

What is the role of card sorts in employability learning?

A key challenge in enhancing student employability in higher education is to stimulate interest – and a degree of ownership – in the employability debate amongst academic colleagues and senior managers in higher education, potential employer partners and, of course, students themselves!

Card sorts offer a flexible approach over a wide range of components of employability learning. These include:

- individual career development
- articulation of personal attributes
- personal development plans
- the formulation of learning outcomes from work placements.

Card sorts, by their flexible nature, stimulate:

- reflection on choices and issues
- discussion with peers on divergent and similar views
- an informed viewpoint, and understanding that other key stakeholders may have different views
- action planning and prioritising on the basis of reflection and discussion including the formulation of negotiated learning outcomes
- reviewing opinions and priorities in the light of further experience.

We have already seen some of the ways in which card sorts have been developed in higher education to support students' individual decision-making about their progression through learning and work. Currently, versions of the

Lifeskills Associates 'Interests, Skills and Values' card sorts are in use in higher education careers services in a number of UK institutions.

In 1996, the 'Intelligent Career Card Sort' (ICCS) was developed by Professor Michael Arthur, Polly Parker and Norm Admunson. The Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby is promoting this aid to people exploring and generating useful data about their own career situation. It is grounded in three 'ways of knowing' defined as:

- knowing-why (motivation identity);
- knowing-how (skills and expertise);
- knowing-whom (relationships and reputation).

Further information can be obtained from the Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby
www.derby.ac.uk/cegs

In June 2002, Dr Peter Hawkins ran a two-day event for LTSN Subject Centres on the 'Windmills Career Development Programme'. This enabled Subject Centre staff to explore their own perceptions of career development and employability as a basis for raising awareness of employability learning within their subject communities. Peter Hawkins used, as part of the Windmills programme, a card sort which is also available electronically:
 www.windmillsprogramme.com/frames.asp This stimulated the LTSN Bioscience and Physical Science Subject Centres to develop electronic card sorts for use by their departments with students: **www.ltsn.ac.uk/esect**> Card sorts

Though these card sorts are subject-specific, both are of relevance to students of all disciplines and offer facilities to develop further customised card sorts for employability and other learning purposes.
The Bioscience site is at **http://bio.ltsn.ac.uk/issues/employability/cardsort/**
The Physical Sciences website is at **http://dbweb.liv.ac.uk/ltsnpsc/employ/cardsort/notes.htm**

If you want to develop your own card sorts, it is important to identify your intended learning outcomes from the activity and check how they fit with the rest of your teaching programme. In that connection, Maggie Boyle and Paul Jackson offer a useful guide to developing card sorts in a briefing paper 'Using Card Sorts', currently in preparation for LTSN Physical Sciences.

Example:

Question: 'What types of card sort are there?'

There are at least three types card sort in use – which one is appropriate for you will depend on the learning outcome you desire.

1. For organising ideas: Prompt cards can be grouped or organised to model a complex system and demonstrate the links between variables.

2. For prioritising ideas: Prompt cards can be used to identify an individual's values, priorities and response to a problem use a different colour for 'category heading' cards.

3. For discussion: Prompt cards can be used simply as a stimulus for clarification and exploration; each card is turned over and becomes a topic for discussion … explain to each other … force individuals out of friendship groups. If there is time, get them to present to each other.

This briefing will be available on the LTSN Physical Sciences website when completed.

The ESECT card sort for staff development

Most card sorts in use in UK universities are for direct student learning, but they also have a role in enabling staff to explore and articulate more fully what may have hitherto been superficial and knee-jerk reactions to employability in the curriculum.

The ESECT card sort exercise has three stages, which may be carried out sequentially or in separate sessions:

- **'Employability is …'** encourages individuals (by using examples) to articulate their views on what 'employability' might mean, discuss these views with colleagues and modify them if appropriate (stage 1).
- **'Employability outcomes'** stimulates clear thinking of what employability attributes a practitioner may wish to develop in his/her students through their academic experiences (stage 2).

- **'Techniques'** raises awareness of a wide range of techniques and learning approaches currently practised which may be used to achieve the desired employability outcomes (stage 3).

Employability is … includes examples of a variety of possible views on employability ranging from "A distraction from the academic agenda" to *"Learning about the world of work"*; from "Graduates getting jobs in areas cognate to their degree specialism" to *"Encouraging involvement in student clubs and societies"*; from *"Taking the right course at the right institution"* to *"About equality of opportunity"*.

Participants sort examples of 'employability' under five headings: 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree' and compare their views in pairs or groups. This gives them greater insights into their own opinions and the basis on which they are held, and into the reality that others do not necessarily share these views.

Blank cards should always be available to enable participants to add as many of their own definitions as they wish.

Employability outcomes focus on clarifying what teachers would like to happen as a result of the learning, either conventionally expressed as Learning Outcomes or in some tangible change in structure or policy to enhance student employability.

"If this is what I mean by employability, what are the consequences? What do I want to happen?"
These may be anything from *"Students are able to understand their personal decision-making style"* to *"Employers get applicants with the right skills at the right time"*.

Again, blank cards should be available to express personal wishes.

'Techniques' enables practitioners, having clarified what they want to happen, to share views on a variety of processes and materials that can support this learning.

Examples are given as a stimulus – *"Games and simulations", "Entrepreneurial modules"; "City & Guilds awards"* – but the real value lies in the additional cards written by participants on the basis of personal experience and used to discuss practice and exchange ideas.

All the materials for use in this exercise, including templates for the cards, may be downloaded from the Higher Education Academy (Generic Centre) website: **www.ltsn.ac.uk/esect** >card sorts

We would like to encourage higher education practitioners to use these materials to stimulate the discussion of employability in their institutions, and to share their experience. HEIs which were involved in the piloting of this card sort have not only contributed to the development of a significant staff development tool, but also reported welcome indications of increased interest and greater insight in informing the employability strategy and practice in their institutions.

References

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