Developing Transferable Skills

This exercise explores the development of a range of transferable skills during doctoral studies; skills that are of critical benefit both during the doctorate and in graduates’ subsequent careers. They are distinct from research-specific skills, and are of value whether a graduate continues in research or academic life, takes employment of direct relevance to their studies, uses their experience of a doctorate as a stepping stone into another area of work, or develops a spin-off business idea from their research (Gilbert et al. 2004: 379).

The focus here is upon how you as a supervisor can use the research process as a means to embed these transferable skills as your students work towards doctorates (Pearson and Brew 2002).

The activity is based on a case study of a doctoral student ‘Jane’, but is fictional and written especially for this training pack. Please read the scenario, and then consider the questions. When you have done this, click ‘Read Comments’ to compare your reflections with our own thoughts on this topic.
Jane’s Diary:

October 1

So here I am at the University of Sheffield, starting my doctorate. It’s a day to which I’ve looked forward for ages: ever since I finished my first degree, when I realised how interested I had become in social geography, and that I wanted to do some research myself. I’ve had to work hard to get here, paying my way through a part-time MSc while I worked at boring evening jobs. Now with the opportunity of a University studentship, at least I won’t have to work in a bar three nights a week.

My research is going to be on the effects of place upon participation in civil and community organisations (everything from sports teams to political parties), and I am going to look at rural and urban environments in the UK and in southern Italy (I can speak passable Italian). Of course I had to write down my research idea when I applied, but I think its broad enough for me to develop my project, and not feel that I have to stick to my first idea.

To be honest, until I meet my supervisors I’m not too sure exactly what I’m going to be doing day to day during this first year of my studies. I suppose the first step is going to entail a long spell in the library, as I find out more about the topic area. After that, I’ll design my study, which I expect is going to involve some fieldwork in the two different locations. And then there’s what feels like a daunting task of writing it up. I have no idea how I’m going to manage to write what is basically a book, but I expect I’ll get there in the end.

At the moment the three or four years that it’s going to take me to finish this doctorate seems to be stretching away into the distant future. Loads of time to fully experience research in a university. I have an idea about what doing research full-time will be like, but really don’t know what it’s going to entail, and what new skills and capacities I will gain along the way.

After the doctorate, what then? I don’t know yet. Somehow I can’t really imagine myself working in a University all my life, so perhaps doing something related to rural policy, or even working in community development? Right now, I’m just enjoying this fantastic freedom to think and read and not have to pull pints!
Reflective Questions

Now read the following questions, and use them to reflect upon the issues of developing transferable skills during doctoral studies that have been raised when reading the scenario. There are no right or wrong responses: this is an opportunity to think more deeply about the issues, and perhaps relate it to your own ideas and experiences. After you have written your thoughts, you can see our comments on each question.

Please answer these questions before reading on in this task.

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<th>Q1. What transferable (non-research-specific) skills might a doctoral student such as Jane need for successful completion of a doctorate? Please list below.</th>
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<th>Q2. What generic transferable skills might she need for her future career? Please list below.</th>
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<th>Q3. How might you use the doctoral development programme (DDP) and the training needs analysis (TNA) process to develop transferable skills</th>
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Our Comments on the reflective questions

Compare what you have written with our thoughts on the questions.

Q1. What transferable (non-research-specific) skills might a doctoral student such as Jane need for successful completion of a doctorate?

The transferable skills needed include:

- Numeracy and literacy;
- Self-awareness, reflection and self-evaluation;
- Communication;
- Networking;
- Decision making;
- Planning and project management;
- Time management;
- Interpersonal skills;
- Problem solving;
- Information and communication technology;
- Resource management and budgeting;
- Risk management;
- Copyright and intellectual property rights.

Q2. What generic transferable skills might she need for her future career?

The transferable skills needed include:

- Writing a relevant c.v.;
- Job application and interview skills;
- Assertiveness;
- Professionalism and integrity in the workplace;
- Teamwork;
- Negotiation;
- Management and leadership;
- Marketing, product branding and selling;
- Business planning and entrepreneurialism;
- Financial management;
- Media literacy, including social media;
- Planning and organising events and activities;
- Delegation and people management;
- Languages.

Q3. How might you use the doctoral development programme (DDP) and the training needs analysis (TNA) process to develop transferable skills

The university’s DDP has been established as a flexible and student-specific training programme. Many of the units offered under the DDP are research-specific (for instance, subject methods; data analysis). However the Programme may also be used to address transferable skills, either through a formal training course (for instance, a language course) or by engaging students in activities that will develop ‘soft’ skills such as oral communication, team-work or problem-solving. The latter can be evaluated by means of a portfolio documenting learning objectives, actions and outcomes.

The TNA is the tool whereby a doctoral student’s transferable skills needs can be identified at the beginning of studies and monitored and evaluated subsequently. It is important not to focus simply on research-specific skills at the expense of transferable skills that may indeed be foundational for the success of doctoral studies. Supervisor and students can use the opportunity of training needs analysis to discuss the possession or need for such underlying transferable skills.

In the later years of the doctorate, use the TNA process to raise questions with students about career-related transferable skills, and how these can be developed as part of the doctorate.

Q4. How can you ensure that the development of transferable skills does not detract from the core activity of undertaking a research project and producing a successful thesis?

Students will be awarded a doctorate based on the production of an adequate written thesis, successfully defended at oral examination. It is therefore important to get the balance right between skills development and training, and the daily business of conducting a research project.
The TNA can be used to assess the needs of a student at different points throughout their period of study. Some transferable skills are essential even for a student to make a success of their first year of studies, while others may not be so urgent. However, it is important that supervisors are aware of transferable skills needs that may emerge during the course of a doctorate. A student’s need to develop a skill such as assertiveness, negotiation, or time management may only become clear as a project develops.

As a doctorate draws to a close, the transferable skills needed for a subsequent career (for instance, job application and interview skills) will also come to the fore. Training needs analysis and the DDP and can be used a vehicle throughout the period of study to assist students to gain the transferable skills they need at that point in time. Whatever a student’s immediate career objectives, doctoral studies can provide a means to develop skills for a future career and enterprise. Subsequent units of this training pack address some of these more specifically.

Q5. How might you foster transferable skills in a) teamwork; b) resource management; and c) media literacy?

**Teamwork**

Doctoral studies can be an isolating activity with few opportunities for developing team-working skills.

However, university life does provide many possibilities for collaboration. Your student could participate in, for instance, helping to organise a departmental social event for postgraduate students, contribute to an open day for sixth form students visiting the University; or help put together a programme for a postgraduate seminar series and organise the meetings.

**Resource Management**

Once the research question has been finalised and your student is beginning to consider the research design and methods to be used, set aside a supervisory meeting to plan in detail the resources (financial, material and human) needed for the successful achievement of the research aims and objectives. Do not forget to include activities such as attendance at conferences or seminars. If the student has a research support fund or other source of funding for their research, use this as the ‘income’ side of a budget and set off all expenditure against this.

**Media Literacy**
A first step could be to look at media coverage of an aspect of your student’s field of study. Use this to discuss how science is reported, and to consider how the student’s own findings might be disseminated to a popular audience.

Later in the study period, or instance when the student has some findings, or has been accepted to present a seminar or conference, get her/him to draft a press release about the finding, and discuss and refine this during a supervisory meeting.

Ask your student to design a web page to disseminate the findings from the study, and discuss how social media may be used to enhance dissemination.

Some Final Thoughts

Having read the scenario, and reflected on the questions and our comments, we hope you have begun to think about the part transferable skills play in students’ success both during their doctoral studies and when launching into a subsequent career, whether in research or another area.

Transferable skills development can be part and parcel of the doctoral process, and the DDP and TNA mechanisms provide a straightforward way to address transferable skills, including those that graduates need in their subsequent careers. As has been seen, developing some transferable skills requires a little ingenuity, and may require engaging students in activities other than the daily work of their research. This could, however, have an additional benefit of involving your student in aspects of University life that might otherwise pass them by. This in turn will add material for their c.v. and job applications.

Some of the transferable skills that we listed earlier, most notably ‘management and leadership’ and ‘project management’ are actually higher–level skills that comprise a number of components (for instance, decision-making, negotiation, people management and so forth). Acquiring a range of transferable skills can thus build these higher competencies in your students and graduates (Pearson and Brew, 2002: 137).

In subsequent scenarios, we look at some of these skills and competencies in greater detail.

Further reading
