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CHAPTER 5

Intended learning and learning in action: Understanding how a competency framework for international business is construed by students

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Abstract

International business education does not always align with the competencies required from the professional field. This may be due to the lack of common language used by professionals, educators and students. This study was conducted to understand how honours students construe the competency framework of their IB programme. Results show that students mostly describe the competency framework differently from how it was intended by professionals. New meaning to existing competencies was given and new competencies were construed that did not relate to the competency framework but to pedagogy. The findings will help educators to better align with the professional field.

Key words

business education; intended learning; alignment; talent; social constructivism

Introduction

Undergraduate international business (IB) education aims to prepare and equip students with the competencies that meet the demands of the workplace. Therefore, to meet these challenges, competency development is increasingly playing an important role in higher education (Azevedo, Apfelthaler, & Hurst, 2012).

Competency frameworks are often developed in collaboration with the professional field (Van Heugten et al., 2016; Jackson, 2009) to ensure alignment between the demands of future employers and graduates' competencies. However, literature expresses that IB education does not adequately prepare graduates for workplace requirements in that their skills and those required for employment do not always align (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Jackson, 2009; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Washer, 2007; Wilton, 2008). The reason for this non-alignment could be lack of common language (Dragoo & Barrows, 2016). It may also be the case that the language used by educators concerning competencies differs from how students talk about it and that intended learning differs from learning in action.

In the constructivist view of competency based education (CBE) in higher education (Beck & Kosnik, 2006), students construe their own learning and formulate their learning outcomes, based on competency frameworks. Understanding how competencies and learning outcomes are spoken about and the language used in how they are construed, will provide more insight into differing interpretations of the competency frameworks. Moreover, it will help educators to guide students in formulating their learning outcomes and choosing their projects. Therefore, in this study, we concentrate on how students construe the competency framework of their educational programme.

Competencies and competency based education

Competencies are described as a range of skills, knowledge and abilities (SKA's) necessary to be successful (Boyatzis, 2008). Since McClelland's appeal to test for competencies rather than intelligence (McClelland, 1973), research on competencies for successful international management and leadership skills has grown exponentially leading to a myriad of competency models (Dries & Pepermans, 2012; Jokinen, 2005). This focus on competencies in the profession is also reflected in higher education. Competency based education (CBE) became

popular concentrating on the ability of learners to demonstrate the SKA's that they have learned. In CBE, curriculum design is centred around competency frameworks (Allen, Ramaekers, & Van der Velden, 2005; Boyatzis 2008, Chyung, Stepich, & Cox, 2006) to help identify and assess the necessary SKA's. Competencies are described in frameworks at international and national level and are used to scaffold education (Tremblay, Lalancette, & Roseveare, 2012; Vereniging Hogescholen, 2011; Voorhees, 2001). They assist at programme level in effective learning and development by identifying the behaviours, SKA's necessary for graduates and are translated into concrete actions (Allen, et al., 2005), specific learning outcomes (Pepper, 2011) and assessments. Competency-based learning is learner focused, and the instructor acts as facilitator, allowing for independent learning. CBE aligns well with the social constructivist view of learning where independent study is also imperative.

Social constructivism

The social constructive approach to learning is a branch of constructivist learning, based on Piaget's theory of learning (Kivunja, 2014). Knowledge is individually constructed by experience rather than just acquiring it (Schell, 2000). Students construe their own understanding and knowledge by experiencing things and using this experience to construe new meaning (Applefield et al., 2000; Bruner, 1990; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). Vygotsky's social constructivism stresses the importance that learning is a social and collaborative activity rather than an individual one (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Learners bring their own worldviews and cultural backgrounds to the learning context, allowing for multiple perspectives. In the social constructivist paradigm, students are responsible for their own learning, design their own learning outcomes and the teacher is a facilitator of this process. However, students' conceptions and interpretations of competencies may differ from how they were intended by the professional and educational field, based on personal beliefs, experience or knowledge (Renting et al., 2015), and it is important that professionals, teachers and students interpret and speak about the associated learning outcomes the same way to ensure alignment between intended learning, learning in action and the professional field.

Alignment of education and the professional field

Alignment of intended learning outcomes, learning in action and experienced learning is known to be lacking (Biemans et al., 2004; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Mulder, 2003; Mulder, 2012). Previous literature describes that competency frameworks are often not made specific enough (Allen et al., 2005; Biemans

et al., 2004), are poorly defined and therefore leave room for ambiguity (Lans, Hulsink, Baert, & Mulder, 2008; Wesselink, Biemans, Mulder, & Van den Elsen, 2007). This leads to diverse interpretations of the frameworks and construction of diverse learning outcomes. Much research on competency frameworks for IB education has been conducted (Allen et al., 2005; Azevedo et al., 2012), but understanding how students interpret and construe competency frameworks and whether it matches intended learning is missing in the literature (Walker, 2008).

Sternberg (2013) contends that educators often misperceive what employers want, and it will be interesting to regard this from the students' perspective. According to Walker (2008), student perspectives on learning outcomes to determine curriculum and course objectives are often not considered. Better understanding of how students construe the competencies offered in the frameworks, contributes to insights into whether intended learning matches learning in action. Lack of alignment can be identified, and if students do not learn what has been intended, it can be addressed. Educators can better facilitate and guide students' learning.

The current study is conducted to understand how students construe the competency framework into learning outcomes and whether their interpretation aligns with how it was intended by the professional field. We have chosen an educational setting which embraces the social constructivist view of learning, talent programmes. Talent programmes, here referred to as honours programmes (HP's), are defined as educational offers for students in higher education and are designed for students who want to do more than the regular programme offers (Wolfensberger, 2015). Honours students are curious and motivated (Scager et al., 2012), prefer autonomy and less structure (Marra & Palmer, 2004; Wolfensberger, 2012). They do not feel challenged by pre-structured courses (Reis & Renzulli, 2010) and are able and motivated to receive more autonomy. This plays an important role in directing their own learning, in line with a social constructivist stance.

We have formulated the following research question: how are the learning outcomes of honours programmes of IB Studies construed by students?

Research methodology

Context of the Study

The research has been conducted at the honours programme (HP) as part of an IB undergraduate programme at a University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. The HP is an enhanced educational programme of 30 credits in addition to the four-year undergraduate IB programme. The HP commences in the first semester of year two of the IB programme through to year four. It is intended for talented students who are selected based on their performance in the regular programme and their intrinsic motivation to participate in the HP. The honours curriculum is based on the competency framework and profile for Highly Talented International Business Professionals (HTIBP) as show in Table 1.

The HTIBP profile was established empirically with professionals in the field of international business and describes five domains (Achieving Results, Communicating, Innovating, Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context and Self-reflecting) with 16 behaviours that distinguish talent, distributed throughout the five domains (Van Heugten et al., 2016).

The pedagogy used in HP's is based on three key components: creating a community, enhancing academic challenge and offering freedom (Wolfensberger, 2012). In 'creating a community', honours students are encouraged to interact, provide feedback and show commitment to learning through knowledge sharing thus creating a sense of connectedness. For the component called 'enhancing academic challenge' honours students, undertake challenging interdisciplinary tasks, embrace multiple perspectives, challenge status quo on varied academic and social issues offered during courses, and apply this knowledge to (business) projects. The third honours pedagogy component 'offering freedom', provides students with a degree of freedom to make informed choices on areas they wish to explore, and they are given room to construe their own learning in those areas. Students operate in an environment which facilitates sharing views and being open to alternative approaches to a problem.

Table 1. HTIBP: profile describing the domains and items of highly talented international business professionals (van Heugten et al., 2016).

Domain	Items
Communicating	Using language effectively in different cultural and professional settings Continuing to ask questions to get a clear understanding of the situation Listening actively to identify a problem or an opportunity
Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context	Adapting one's professional approach to another culture Combining expertise from different specialties Showing patience and control in culturally diverse environments
Innovating	Coming up with creative ideas proactively Improving ideas from others Keeping up with the latest professional developments Showing inventive, new possibilities by thinking 'out of the box'
Achieving results	Showing perseverance in complex environments Taking responsibility for achieving goals Showing entrepreneurship
Self-reflecting	Showing independence in thinking of new possibilities Understanding one's strengths and weaknesses, and acting upon it Improving oneself beneficial to the organisation

During the first and second semester of year two, students work on various projects and interdisciplinary tasks in areas students wish to explore. They are linked to the domains and behaviours of the HTIBP and discussed with their mentor.

In year three, honours students spend one year abroad. Six months are spent working at an internationally operating company and the remaining six months are spent on studying at an IB partner university to fulfil their study requirements. In the final year of the HP, students hold a capstone defence, a final-year culminating assessment. They explain their learning journey throughout the HP in relation to the HTIBP profile, by summing how they construed their learning outcomes during the entire HP, providing information suited for our analysis.

The oral defences consisted of a 10-15-minute presentation followed by a question- and-answer session. During the question and answer sessions students had the opportunity to justify, elaborate on, or further analyse their work in front of a panel of honours mentors and lecturers.

Participants and procedure

A census of all 22 HP capstone defences held between 2014 and 2016 was conducted. The first cohort of students using the HTIBP profile would graduate in 2014. Based on audibility and how extensive the honours students fulfilled their capstone assignment, four capstones were discarded, leaving 18 capstone video's totalling 498 minutes, suited for analysis. The videotaped oral defences and the following question-and-answer sessions were transcribed verbatim. The completed transcripts were compared to the recordings to ensure accuracy. In addition, the transcripts were anonymised by removing names and any other identifiers from the transcripts (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2010). The raters were independent evaluators, neither lecturers within the HP nor involved in the process of mentoring students in their capstone experiences. Students' names have been replaced by Participant (P), plus a random number.

Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis approach has been employed to analyse the textual data with the purpose of gaining insight into how the learning outcomes have been construed by honours students (Hennink et al., 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The capstone defence transcripts were coded using open- axial- and selective coding, as described by Hennink et al. (2010), using software for qualitative data analysis, ATLAS.ti. In the open coding stage, line-by-line coding was conducted to identify broad categories in each individual transcript, not limiting our analysis to codes related to the HTIBP profile but to include all aspects of the students' learning journey. Two independent researchers coded individually to ensure inter-rater reliability (Sandbergh 1997).

After analysing 10 video transcripts, saturation of data, using an iterative process as described by Hennink et al. (2010) was identified. Two additional transcripts were coded, and saturation was confirmed when no new codes were selected. Therefore, the remaining transcripts were not included.

In the next stage, the axial coding stage, all codes were compared and grouped into clusters, in a consensus meeting between the researchers. Hennink et al. (2010), describes these clusters as what a group of codes collectively reveals. These clusters were later reduced in the final phase of analyses, the selective coding.

While not limiting analysis to the HTIBP profile, and remaining objective in the coding stages, both researchers have been actively involved in the creation of the HTIBP. To avoid bias, the clusters and their underlying codes were also critically considered by a further three independent researchers, without knowledge of the content of the HTIBP profile. After a consensus with those three independent researchers, the clusters were finalized. In the next stage, the findings were then compared to the HTIBP framework to identify how students themselves have construed the HTIBP in their own honours learning journey.

Findings

On the basis of the textual analysis of the transcribed capstone video recordings, clusters were formed, showing how students of an HP in IB construed their learning outcomes. The results are presented by explicating the clusters in alphabetical order. For each cluster the behaviours leading to that description, are presented, and then supported by quotes from the analysis. A summary of the overall results is found in Table 2.

Achieving Results

Students described achieving results in the context of managing to achieve something through projects abroad or by using an opportunity and often spoke about the approach or method used. For example by realising that taking small steps is better and more manageable than taking large steps, and by setting realistic goals and expectations. For example P1 stated the importance of adapting and “thinking about more realistic goals, and we could still do something, and even if we didn’t take big steps like we wanted to, we took small steps, and these small steps also helped.” (P1).

In addition, the journey on the way to achieving results is often described. As part of that journey, enjoying yourself and also showing perseverance are spoken about. For example students should be “... striving to have fun and do what they enjoy and by doing that, achieving these things.” (P2).

Table 2. Summary of eight clusters, describing how Honours students construe their learning outcomes

Cluster name	Description
Achieving results	How to achieve results, and the journey to achieving results
Broadening perspective	Possessing the desire and ability to gain contextual intelligence
Community	Sharing and feeling of belonging to members of the same community and external community with the sense of contributing to society
Courage	Not being afraid of the unknown and daring
Effective communication in different settings	Asking questions and listening. Cultural contexts in which to apply language.
Experiencing freedom	Having choices and freedom to explore own learning
Innovation	Creativity, inventiveness and solving problems in this manner
Personal development	Personal awareness, growth, development, insights, reflection and self-discovery

Broadening perspectives

Students described they learned to see multiple perspectives and more viewpoints or alternatives, as illustrated by some quotes: “..... the honours programme taught me to look in more different directions, and I think before I was really focused on this one thing and didn’t really think about other opportunities and so I think in a sense that thinking about alternatives definitely has benefitted me.” (P4). “The conclusion was that we perceive risk to our own limited frame of references and if we manage to expand our frame, we are able to estimate the risk more precisely.” (P1)

Broadening perspectives was spoken about from a standpoint of personal development, and in relation to becoming more open-minded and more aware of the world. As P5 expressed: “Honours allowed me to broaden my mind, and explore the areas where I was blind. This required an open mentality to further develop my personality.”

Community

In this cluster the internal- and external community were described. The internal community included comments about how having a sense of belonging and having peer feedback helped learning. For example P2 said: “... because it is the true capacity to unlock one’s real potential with the help of someone else”

and P6 said: "... getting ideas, sharing and learning from the group as well as feeling understood contributed to learning."

External community was mentioned in relation to being selfless, doing something for other people, giving something back to the community, learning to network and to working with external stakeholders to achieve a common goal. Example quote is "... showed me that everybody is capable of doing something let's say that is not simply for themselves." (P7).

Courage

Students described learning outcomes in terms of how to handle uncertainty, cope with hesitation and fear and how to find the courage to do something new or different and how to challenge themselves to do something they disliked. For example, participants mentioned: "I do not know where my aspirations will drive me, but I am certain that I want to explore life to its fullest. I want to inspire people to overcome their fears while being an example and facing mine" (P6). "I was also afraid and mostly had social fears, and I knew that there were a lot of things that I had to do and I had to jump off my tower to get there, and I used the honours way to get off my tower and feel all these things." (P3).

Effective communication in different settings

Students spoke about this in terms of 'using communication in different cultures and contexts' but also in terms of 'learning to listen' and 'asking deeper questions'. Example student quotes are "...so I think based on the leadership course, what I learned, what I can also use later is to listen to people, and accept different ideas and opinions...., and I try to combine all the ideas" (P9). "..... listening to others is also kind of an art but sometimes you cannot always just bring up your own ideas..." (P8). Communication is used as a tool to become more open-minded by listening to others and by combining different ideas.

Experiencing freedom

The importance of freedom here for students lies in the possibility of having choices within the educational programme and enjoying having such freedom. As freedom is a core component of the pedagogy used in HP's, and as it is a common trait of honours students to desire such freedom, it resonated in how students construed their learning outcomes. Students mentioned for example: "... I liked that you had to find something you enjoy and then you had to back it up so well that your mentor was going to say: "I am giving you permission to look into it" (P2).

Innovation

Having new inventive ideas, and making something from scrap, but also learning to spot opportunities, being creative and thinking out of the box were described. Also personal development that came along with innovation, such as facing challenges, not following pre-determined trails and rules all the time and trying to structure and synergise various ideas was described. Examples quotes are: "... I think what honours taught me is how to not play by the rules. Honours actually taught me how to think outside of the box" (P2). Also, "So this year taught me to be your own maker and not to follow predetermined trails because sometimes your life is in a shaker which makes you vulnerable to other people's take" (P5).

Personal development

This cluster included descriptions of all aspects within personal development, such as personal growth, the discovery of personal identity, self-awareness, self-knowledge and insight. These personal development aspects, in turn, are often addressed in the context of students' learning experiences, journey, and explorations which, through reflection, led to such awareness. Gaining personal insight is also described in relation to discovering personal strengths and weaknesses thereby realising that the mind-set can be different or change. Some example quotes to illustrate are: "I really learned to listen to myself, to listen to my body whatever my body is telling me, and I really learned to reflect on myself, my actions and my strengths and my weaknesses." (P9) "...in order to succeed in a business world you have to be aware about your personality. And not only in the business world but also in your private life." (P6) "...I was always doing things according to what I was supposed to do to, but I never took the time because to really say: why do I do it?". (P7).

Discussion and conclusion

As alignment of intended learning outcomes, learning in action and experienced learning in IB is known to be lacking (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Jackson, 2009), this study was conducted to understand how honours students construed the HTIBP competency framework and if their interpretations differed from how they were intended. The present study results confirm that students interpret and mostly describe the competency framework differently from how they were intended by professionals, with the exception of communication. Students have added new meaning to existing competencies in the HTIBP framework:

‘achieving results, innovating, seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context.’ In addition, they have construed new clusters: ‘experiencing freedom, courage, community and personal development’ that were not in the framework, inspired by the HP pedagogy.

That students give new meaning to those competences might be because of the differences in the context in which the competencies are construed and are learned. For example, the domain ‘achieving results’ is construed from students’ perspective in terms of the process and journey of learning, as opposed to the professionals’ interpretations of having and taking responsibility for achieving results. Jackson (2014) states that enactment of the competencies in varying contexts influences perception. For students, the journey and process of learning are their result, whereas from the perspective of experienced professionals, achieving results is spoken about in terms of responsibility. In higher education the demands of the professional field, as defined in the competency frameworks, should take precedence. Too much freedom for students to define learning goals can lead to misalignment. Bounded freedom in the form of increased guidance from mentors or facilitators to ensure alignment is needed. Krahenbuhl (2016) cautions against offering too much freedom as students may lack sufficient experience and insight to construe meaning in line with the demands of the professional field.

Dragoo and Barrows (2016) argue that a common language should be used when implementing competency based education. This makes ‘translating’ competency frameworks from the professional- to the educational context relevant to improve a common understanding to enhance alignment. For example the domain ‘communication’ was construed by students in alignment with how it was intended by educators and professionals. Perhaps this is because communication is already well-established and well-described in IB (De Waal, Van der Heijden, Selvarajah, & Meyer, 2012; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Trinkka, 2004) as well as in educational programmes (Conrad & Newberry, 2012; Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Waldeck, Durante, Helmuth, & Marcia, 2012). Communication recurs in all practical assignments in many different forms and varying contexts during IB programmes and HP’s, including international work- and study placements. Also, as part of IB education, students work in multicultural settings and need to behave in a culturally sensitive communicative manner. It might be that experience with and exposure to various aspects and contexts of communication contributed to

clarity on how communication was intended, contributing to good alignment. Besides adding new meaning to existing competencies, additional clusters, not present in the HTIBP competency framework, were construed by students: community, experiencing freedom, courage, and personal development.

Community is described by students as a sense of belonging to a group and to sharing knowledge and experiences and learning from each other. It links to the HP pedagogy component 'creating a community' in which teachers are facilitators and mentors who show connectedness and interest in the students and who are available for them.

Similarly, the clusters experiencing freedom and courage are construed by students, without these being in the competency framework. Students appreciated the challenge of exploring what to learn and how to achieve such learning. The HP pedagogy component freedom is set out to stimulate such behaviours, facilitated by the mentoring approach of the HP teachers. The self-managed approach to learning evokes exploring and considering alternatives and processes (Zimmerman, 2002). Students learn to become independent and adaptable thinkers who have the courage to handle freedom.

When in self-managed learning in education, experiencing freedom is construed, it would also be desirable in a work-related context to allow high performers to develop further. According to Persson (2014) this is currently a challenge for many businesses, and the workplace does not offer enough flexibility and freedom for high performers to blossom.

Limitations of the research

This study was conducted within a group of honours students. As honours students have specific characteristics, extrapolation of our results to other groups ought to be carefully considered.

The student body of HP's in IB has a high degree of cultural diversity, which may have influenced their perceptions. A study by Van Heugten et al. (2017) shows that perceptions of the behaviours belonging to the HTIBP competency framework differ in Western Europe and Eastern Asia. It would be interesting to research if cultural background would affect how competency frameworks are construed. This can be achieved by expanding future research to include all new HP students in IB, thus increasing the number of students contained within each cultural group.

It must be acknowledged that the participants, may have included socially desirable answers due to the assessment context. The self-reflection ethos within the HP, where critical reflection is promoted and rewarded, would reduce the chance of social acceptability bias being present in the capstone defences. The generalisability of the results is limited due to data collection being restricted to one educational institution. Validation would require data collection and analysis in multiple IB HP's.

In the present study, we have not included an assessment of faculty interpretation of the domains and behaviours in the HTIBP. As faculty may transmit their interpretations to students through coursework and interactions, this would be a valuable area for further research.

Practical implications

The present study shows that when students are offered the freedom to create their own learning in a social constructivist paradigm, using competency frameworks, these frameworks provide direction but are not totally representative of learning in action. Honours students use different words in how they construe their learning outcomes and more learning occurs than is offered in competency frameworks. When more is learned than intended, it can be regarded as an enrichment (Conlon, 2004). Students may learn new and relevant things not yet captured and updated in competency frameworks. This provides valuable information which can be used to inform course development and to cross-reference with the professional field to better adopt the language used in competency frameworks and also to fine-tune and update existing frameworks. This is especially useful in continually and rapidly changing markets (Sternberg, 2013). The freedom offered to students in a self-directed approach to learning, and the learning that is construed beyond what is intended, may provide useful information and contribute to bridging the gap between higher education and professional life (Banis-Den Hertog, 2016).

Differences in interpretation of competency frameworks result in insights in the gaps between what professionals expect from graduates and what these graduates possess. Such differences need to be discussed and when new students are presented with a competency framework, it is important that the language used is clear to them (Westera, 2001). In education, enough time needs to be reserved to allow for frequent communication between teachers, students and the professional field to discuss the meaning attached to existing

and also new competencies. Using the words of how more senior students have construed their learning outcomes can help achieve better alignment. Educators, documentation and all other communication should use the same vocabulary as the professional field and curriculum development should reinforce this.

Competency frameworks ought to be updated frequently to stay in tune with a continually developing globalised world, which also involves frequent monitoring and communication with the work field.

The freedom given, using the social constructivist approach, needs to be bounded more closely by the competency profile to satisfy the requirements of the professional field and improve alignment. More flexible frameworks could include an empty domain that is used freely for possible additions, instead of trying to capture all in a set one-size-fits all framework, subject to review relatively infrequently. Although, in their guidance facilitators should keep the competency framework in mind to enhance alignment. Also how students construe these frameworks needs to be monitored regularly to confirm alignment or to identify lack thereof.

So by investing more time in education in discussing competency frameworks with all stakeholders, including the students, and by facilitators aligning their guidance with these frameworks, alignment between education and professional practice can be significantly improved.

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