



The Too Hard Basket

Communication, graduate competence, employer expectations, and teaching the 'innate'

Elna Fourie & Trish Clokie

26th Annual New Zealand Communication Conference

1-2 December, 2014, Wellington

In a previous episode . . .

“How to get personal attributes out of the too hard basket and incorporate them in a systematic way, into teaching, assessing and reporting, will provide a challenge to educationalists that will question the core of what they are doing.”

(Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002)



Objective

**Mā tōu rourou, mā tōku rourou ka ora ai te
iwi**

***Through your basket (contribution) and my basket
(contribution) we can feed our people***

Context / Background

- Teaching Context
- Research on employer expectations of communication skills of graduates
 - *‘Communication in the vernacular of employability skills’*
 - Survey of 30 Wintec Employers
 - Analysis of first year Communication module content

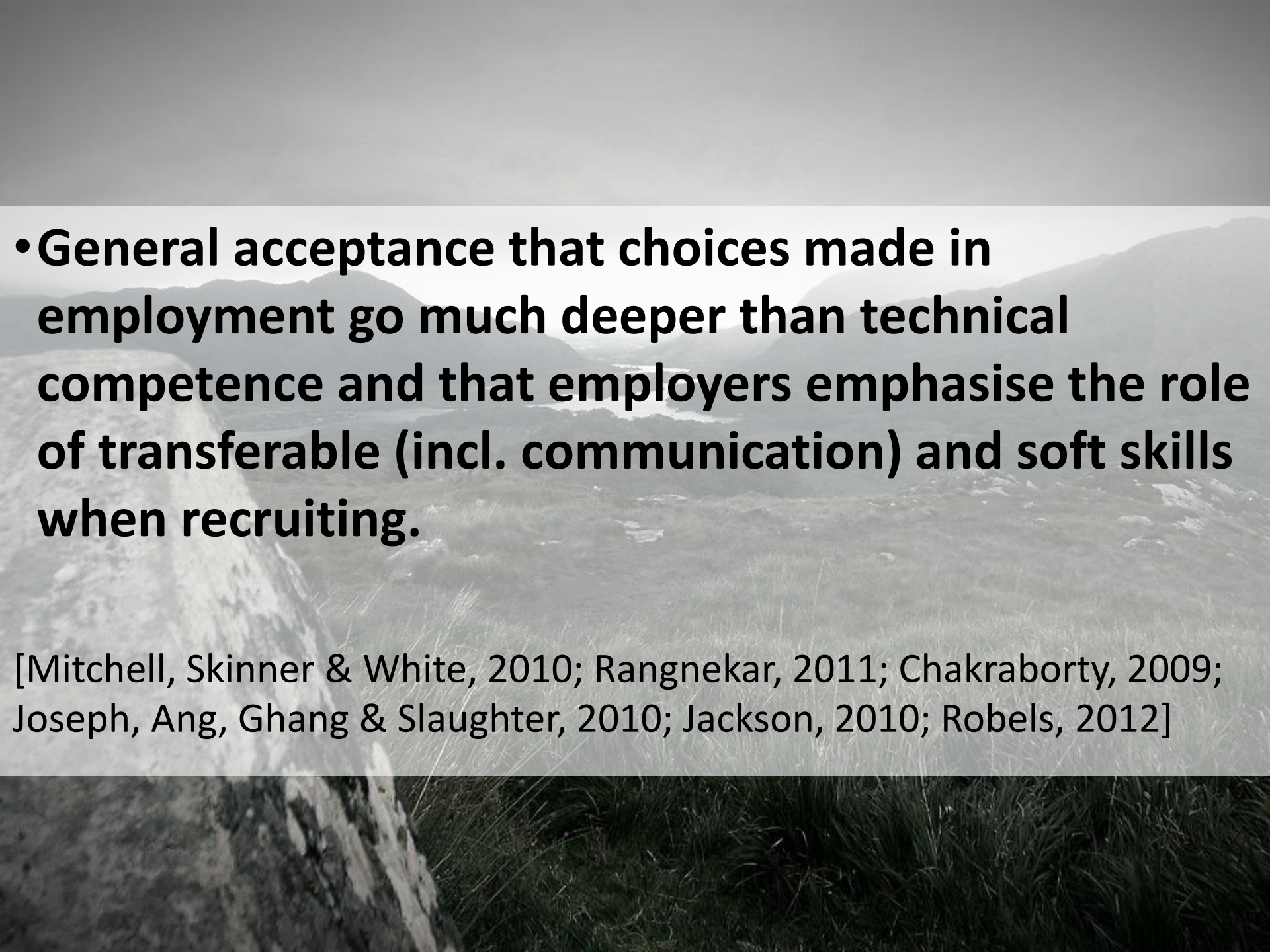
Snapshot of our Research

- Our findings are consistent with broader international research on employability skills and communication.
- Employers found core comm. skills important, and found writing skills of graduates wanting, but also noted issues with interpersonal skills ‘in context’; as well as personal attributes like self-motivation and confidence.
- Course content included in descriptors is relevant, but emphasis differs from what employers said
 - Also, content doesn’t specifically include some of the personal competencies employers identified.

‘Are these innate?’; ‘Is it our job to teach them?’

Communication as part of the 'employability' landscape

- **Well established in literature that communication and soft skills are essential in recruitment and employment situations.**

- 
- **General acceptance that choices made in employment go much deeper than technical competence and that employers emphasise the role of transferable (incl. communication) and soft skills when recruiting.**

[Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010; Rangnekar, 2011; Chakraborty, 2009; Joseph, Ang, Ghang & Slaughter, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Robels, 2012]

What's less clear . . .

- **Employment adverts and research on graduate employability use the terms soft skills, communication skills and generic skills somewhat interchangeably, and frequently define these terms in a different way.**
- **'Communication' in this sense incorporates more than general communication theory accounts for.**

- Mitchell, Skinner and White (2010):
 - ‘soft skills’ include time management, team work, communication, ethics, and appreciation of diversity.
- Andrews and Higson’s (2008):
 - soft or transferable skills include self-management, self-confidence and communication skills; written and oral.
- Hager, Holland, Beckett (2002):
 - Generic skills involve personal qualities and attributes
 - These qualities include the ability to form relationships through oral communication and teamwork, think independently and critically, to manage knowledge, and to be curious.

“a very mixed bag of things”

(Hager et. al. p.3)

- **Descriptions of soft/generic/transferrable skills include intrapersonal and interpersonal communication.**
- **Descriptions also include attributes like self-confidence and curiosity.**
- **Payne (2004) suggests communication competence also requires motivation, knowledge and skill.**
 - **Employers look for competence: skill to do something, as well as the desire to do it.**

Talking about 'doing things'...

Post-It note exercise

- What's your pick of top 10 employability skills?
 - *Write them down on Post-It notes (one post it for each skill)*
- Which of these are/incorporate communication skills?
 - *If possible, use different colours for communication vs. not*
- Which of these do you believe are 'teachable'?
 - *Which ones aren't? *label/comment on these*



Teamwork	Interpersonal skills	Motivation
Leadership	Technology skills	Flexibility
Assertiveness	Intrapersonal skills	Positivity
Writing skills	Cultural Sensitivity	Attitude
Oral Presentations	Visual Presentations	Work ethic
Critical Thinking	Conflict Management	Drive
Decision-Making	Academic Results	Investigative
Problem Solving	Values fit	Analytical
Flexibility	Emotional Intelligence	Adaptability
Self-management	Planning/Organising	Learning
Listening Skills	Independence	Enthusiasm
Integrity	Commercial Awareness	Initiative
Responsibility	Time Management	Social skills

Post It's Continued...

- Rank the skills according to inclusion in basic communication teaching – your perspective.
- **What's your top two?**

Some recent lists...

'Executive perceptions'

{Robles, 2012}

- Integrity
- Communication
- Courtesy
- Responsibility
- Social skills
- Positive Attitude
- Professionalism
- Flexibility
- Team work
- Work ethic

Australian Graduate Careers, Graduate Outlook Survey

{ACCI, 2012}

- Interpersonal & communication skills
- Passion/drive/commitment/attitude
- Critical reasoning/problem solving
- Academic Results
- Values fit/Cultural Alignment
- Work Experience
- Emotional Intelligence
- Teamwork
- Activities (intra & extra curricular)
- Leadership

Recent lists...

'Skills employers are looking for'

(Careers NZ, 2014)

- **Communication skills**
- **Customer service**
- **Teamwork**
- **Literacy & Numeracy**
- **Confidence with technology**
- **Planning & Organising**
- **Initiative/can do**
- **Problem-solving**
- **Good work habits/independence**
- **Health and Safety Skills**



Whose Responsibility?

- Jackson (2010) notes the responsibility for teaching soft and transferable skills is becoming increasingly seen as the role of tertiary institutes...

“HEIs worldwide, however, are accused of producing graduates deficient in the "soft" skills deemed essential for enhanced productivity and innovation in the workplace . . . blame is consistently directed at the design, content and structure of undergraduate programmes.”

It's up to higher education institutes, and programmes within these institutes, to decide to accept this challenge or not.

Learning 'on the job'?

- Jackson (2010) argues that there are 'threshold competencies' and 'distinguishing competencies'
 - Some are required and some would be seen as 'ideal' (p.32)
- Payne (2004) discusses:
 - 'pre-competence' - generic communication ability not yet acculturated into the specific business context
 - 'threshold communication' – competence achieved through the addition of socialisation.

Is it possible to prepare students with 'distinguishing' competencies, or providing the 'socialisation' aspect in communication classes?



The Too Hard Basket Challenge

Place one or two skills that may be/are less 'teachable' into your 'too hard basket'

Swap kete with another table.

Remove the skills from the basket, and write down solutions/examples/best practice to address these in course design or delivery.

An opportunistic note...

Raised over the course of this conference...

'Communication is a pre-requisite for success'


- Confidence
- Social capital
- Psychological capital
- Socialising skills
- Self-confidence
- Initiative

- Resourcefulness
- Positivity
- Motivation
- Entrepreneurship
- Persistence
- Responsibility
- Ability to adapt
- Innovation

So, HOW do we teach these?



Concluding thoughts...

- The challenge of teaching the ‘innate’ aspects of communication is relevant, important, and approachable.
 - The challenge is not considering ‘if’ teaching communication should include boarder skillsets, aptitudes, and competencies, but how course and programme design can include these in a real way.
 - We have the collective knowledge and experience to take up the challenge – why not use this network to discuss it?
- 





Thank you!

**I intend to collate your responses, and am happy to share!
Email me if you'd like a copy.**

References

- Andrews, J. & Higson, H. (2008). Graduate Employability, 'soft Skills' Versus 'Hard' Business Knowledge: A European Study. *Higher Education in Europe*, 33(4), 411 -422. doi:10. 1080/03797720802522627
- Careers New Zealand (2014). Skills Employers are Looking For [Web Page]. Retrieved from <http://www.careers.govt.nz/plan-your-career/not-sure-what-to-do/skills-employers-are-looking-for/>
- Chakraborty, M. (2009). Soft skills: Essential for shaping well-rounded individuals. *ICFAI Journal of Soft Skills*, 3(2), 13-18. Retrieved from http://www.iupindia.in/Soft_Skills.asp
- Hager, P., Holland, S., & Beckett, D. (2002). *Enhancing the learning and employability of graduates: the role of generic skills*. Retrieved from <http://www.bhert.com/position-papers.html>
- Jackson, D. (2010). An international profile of industry-relevant competencies and skill gaps in modern graduates. *International Journal of Management Education (Oxford Brookes University)*, 8(3), 29-58. doi:10.3794/ijme.83.288

- Joseph, D., Ang, S., Chang, L. H. R., & Slaughter, A. S. (2010, February.) Practical intelligence in IT: Assessing soft skills of IT professionals. *Communications of the ACM*, 52(2), 149-154. doi:10.1145/1646353.1646391
- Mitchell, G. W., Skinner, L. B., & White, B. J. (2010). Essential Soft Skills For Success In The Twenty-First Century Workforce As Perceived By Business Educators. *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, 52(1), 43-53. Retrieved from <http://www.dpe.org/publications.htm>
- Payne, H. J. (2004). Reconceptualizing social skills in organizations: Exploring the relationship between communication competence, job performance, and supervisory roles. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 11(2), 63-77. Retrieved from <http://jlo.sagepub.com/>
- Robles, M, M. (2012, October 8). Executive Perceptions of the Top 10 Soft Skills Needed in Today's Workplace. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* December 2012, 75(4), 453-465. doi: 10.1177/1080569912460400
- Rangnekar, S. S. (2011, October-2012, March). Soft skills in management. *International Journal of Business Insights & Transformation*, 5(1), 108-109.