A suggested program for developing first-year university Students' agency

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Abstract

Students joining universities sometimes lack the agency to lead their lives and succeed in higher education. In the educational context, agency refers to the more empowered positioning of students to be active agents in their own learning lives. Enhancing life skills/competencies can facilitate students' agency when they instill positive set beliefs and personal competencies, creating agentic capacity. Action Learning is one of the methods used to enhance life skills/competencies by engaging students in real life problems, taking action, and continuously reflecting on their actions. This paper presents a suggested program for building firs-year university students' agency through a balanced approach of Competency-based Learning, Action Learning, and Reflective Learning.

Keywords: Action learning; agency; competency-based learning; reflective learning; university students.

1. Introduction

Student agency refers to the quality of students' self-reflective and intentional actions and interactions with their environment. "It encompasses variable notions of agentic possibility ("power") and agentic orientation ("will")" (Klemenčič, 2015, p.11). Bandura (2006) identified four core properties of human agency; intentionality, forethought (set themselves goals and anticipate likely outcomes of prospective actions to guide and motivate their efforts), self-reactiveness (self-regulation), and self-reflectiveness (metacognitive capabilities). According to Heckman and Kautz (2013), skills give agency to people to shape their lives in the present and to create future skills. Murphy-Graham and Cohen (2022) offered a general definition of life skills. For them, life skills are skills "to be able to do life well" (p. 37), opening the answer to be 'it depends" (Schmidt, 2022, p.268). Research has informed various intervention programs to enhance youth life skills according to the context where they are applied. Due to life skills nature vary according to the culture and the environment (UNICEF, 2003), each program differs in its goals and approaches (Bender, 2002).

One of the goals of teaching life skills is to support students' transition from one educational level to the other, raising their awareness (Akfırat & Kezer, 2016). The program suggested was designed for first-year university students in Egypt to enhance students' agency. The program uses three approaches to learning to enhance students' agency; Concept-based Learning, Active Learning, and Reflective Learning. This program was implemented with twenty first-year university students from different disciplines. There were clear signs of skills/competencies development and agency enhancement in the final presentation, students' reflections, and mentors' notes.

2. The Suggested Program

The program used the backward design model (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to plan the curriculum design sequence. The following are the details of the program under the three aspects of the backward design; identifying desired outcomes, determining acceptable evidence, and planning learning experiences.

2.1. Identifying Desired Outcomes

The first step is articulating desired outcomes needed for first-year university students. In this step, Competency-based Learning was used to identify and define precise measurable descriptions of knowledge, skills, and behaviors students will possess at the end of the program. The Competency-based curriculum emphasizes life skills and evaluates mastery of skills necessary for an individual to function proficiently in a given society (Savage, 1993).

The following are the four main competencies, each with sub-indicators that sets curriculum skills focus and objectives.

Table 1: The Program Desired Outcomes of Main Competencies and Skills Indicators.

Main Competencies	Skills indicators
	By the end of the course, participants will be able to
Reliability On one self *the quality of being trustworthy of oneself performing consistently well.*	**S-1-1: Self-awareness** S-1-1-a: identify the values and indicators of self-awareness S-1-1-b: analyze preferences and style S-1-1-c: develop self-awareness **S-1-3: Self-reflectiveness** S-1-3-a: explore past experiences in detail S-1-3-b: point out reasons behind preferable and unpreferable actions S-1-3-c: reconsider alternatives and identify the next steps S-1-3-d: take reflective actions and develop new skills and strategies **S-1-4: Self-regulation** S-1-4-a: practice self-control and resilience strategies S-1-4-b: practice self-motivation and positive thinking S-1-4-c: practice strategies of mental focus and concentration S-1-4-d: practice strategies to manage negative feelings
Connectability With others *the quality of being able to connect with different people for different purposes*	**S-2-1: Communication** S-2-1-a: interpret received non-verbal messages and give appropriate answers S-2-1-b: use a variety of speaking and writing techniques to communicate with a variety of audiences S-2-1-c: read critically from a variety of sources and understand the hidden meaning **S-2-2: Social presence** S-2-2-a: collaborate with others to accomplish tasks S-2-2-b: build meaningful relationships and avoid negative peer influence S-2-2-c: accept and understand others' differences **S-2-4: Civic engagement and leadership** S-2-4-a: recognize the relationship between community challenges and personal skills and contributions S-2-4-b: manage peoples' skills and monitor achievements S-2-4-c: adopt passionate ideas and use influence strategy to form team motivation
Ingenuity In life roles *the quality of being clever, original, and inventive.*	**S-3-1: Intentionality** S-3-1-a: practice self-direction and clear vision S-3-1-b: initiate and resume actions to reach desired results **S-3-2: Forethought** S-3-2-a: set clear, challenging, and realistic long-term and short-term goals S-3-2-b: plan specific actions to achieve goals S-3-2-c: follow-through with plans taking corrective actions throughout **S-3-3: Creativity** S-3-3-a: find, interpret, judge, and create information S-3-3-b: process and analyze information by sifting, sorting, comparing, verifying, and trying out different ways to make sense of the information S-3-3-c: practice observing, gathering, organizing, and testing information to formulate and support critical arguments S-3-3-d: consider multiple alternatives and create novel and innovative ideas
Main Competencies	**Skills indicators**
	By the end of the course, participants to be able to ………………….
	S-4-1: Agility

Adaptability To one's environment	S-4-1-a: think and draw conclusions using intellectual acuity
	S-4-1-b: react quickly to precarious situations with clear priority measures
	S-4-2: Decision-making and problem-solving
	S-4-2-a: combine knowledge, understanding, and skills to create solutions
	S-4-2-b: consider unlikely or impossible alternatives
	S-4-2-c: examine alternatives from different perspectives
	S-4-3: Coping with unexpected situations
the quality of being able to adjust to new conditions	S-4-3-a: practice flexible thinking by developing multiple opposing, contradictory, and complementary arguments
	S-4-3-b: apply skills and knowledge in unfamiliar situations
	S-4-3-c: manage change by adopting alternation and practicing adaptive skills

2.2. Determining Acceptable Evidence

According to Mkonongwa (2018), competencies can be used as criteria for assessing the competency attainment level required for success. The program uses the competencies set as criteria of assessment through the program. Mentors keep track to produce their final judgment of each sub-skills level for each student (skills are scored in four levels).

2.2.1. Students Journals

Students keep a journal throughout the program that they must use daily to record all actions or problems encountered.

2.2.2. Ongoing Observations

Mentors write anecdotal notes for each group member after each reflective session describing how they reacted and any significate signs showing the competencies.

2.2.3. Final Presentation

At the end of the program, every group presents the project journey, and each member mentions their perspective of competencies enhanced in this project.

2.3. Planning Strategies for Implementation

2.3.1. Planned Interactive Workshops

As much as identifying which skills to teach in a program, how to teach them is more important (Schmidt, 2022). The program starts with some interactive workshops on basic competencies/skills. The interactive workshops through the implementation of the project clarify some concepts students need at this specific phase/step of the project. Reflective tasks through the implementation of the project are designed to consolidate students' self-discoveries and support skills' development.

Table 2: Alignment of Project Steps/Phases with Action Leaning process, Interactive Workshops, and Reflective Tasks.

Project Steps/Phases	Action Learning Process	Interactive Skills Workshops	Reflective Tasks
Before introducing the project		- Know about yourself - The growth mindset	Task 1: Individual self-assessment of competencies using program outcomes before the beginning of the project and putting individual aims.
a. Explore their community.	- Present challenge/problem/issue/question	- Communication skills - Self-motivation	Task 2: Individual Reflective questionnaires focusing on self-discoveries and setting the next steps.
b. Creating an idea to develop their community.	- Insight? New ideas and understanding, perceptions and assumptions.	- Collaboration skills - Designing an action plan	Task 3: Group reflective questionnaire of how the idea was developed. Task 4: Individual Reflective questionnaires focusing on self-discoveries and setting the next steps.
c. Implement this idea.	- Test actions in the workplace - Bring results back to set. What worked, what did not work	- Time management - Self-management - Perseverance	Task 5: Regular group reflective sessions supported by the mentor. Task 6: Individual Reflective questionnaires focusing on self-discoveries and setting the next steps.
d. Collect evidence of learning.	- Drawing conclusions and marking learning		Task 7: Review of self-assessment in Task 1
e. Present the outcomes.			Task 8: Individual Reflective journal of what was learned in the program.

2.3.2. Designing the Project Procedures

The most effective learning is based on the need to solve problems (Welskop, 2013). Action Learning is a structured method that enables small groups to engage in real-life problems, take action, and learn as individuals and as a team while doing so (Serrat, 2017). Revans (1983), the originator of Action Learning, believes that people must be aware of their

shortage of knowledge to be motivated to complete it. They then start to ask questions and collaborate with others to find solutions, try them out, reflect again, and so on. In the process of reflection, experience theory is transformed into knowledge, which undoubtedly increases learning effectiveness (Welskop, 2013). Figure 1 clarifies the Action Learning Process. In this process, they develop agency components of; intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflectiveness.
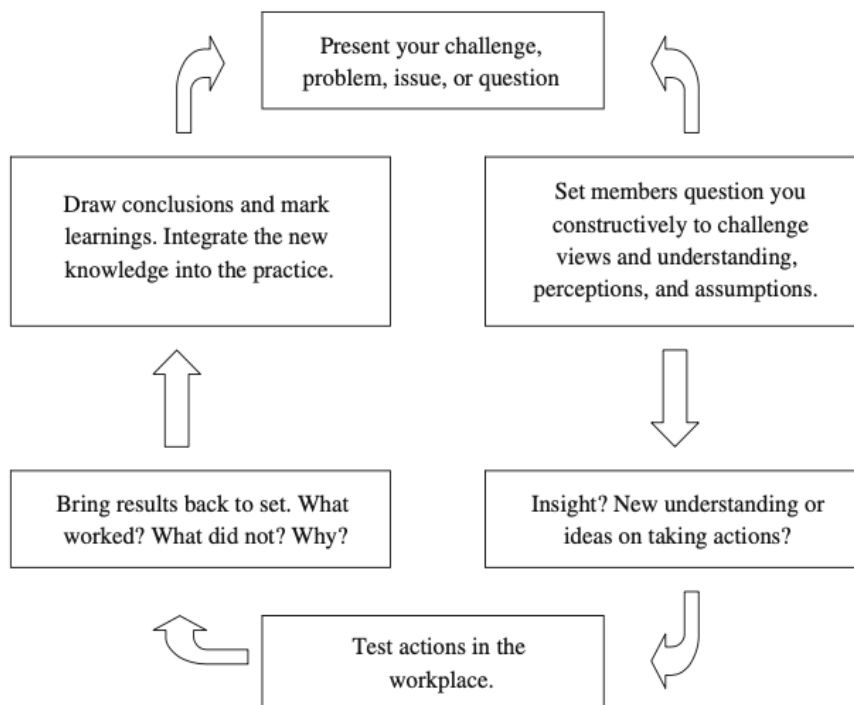

Figure 1. The Action Learning Process (Serrat, 2017).

The project takes students into different phases to implement an idea they create. The project goes through the following steps in groups of five supported by a mentor:

    a.   Explore their community.
    b.   Creating an idea to develop their community.
    c.   Implement this idea.
    d.   Collect evidence of learning.
    e.   Present the outcomes.

2.3.3. The Reflective Spiral

According to Powell (2004), "Reflective practice is a hallmark of quality instruction" (P.2). Moon (2005) mentions that "reflective learning emphasizes the intention to learn from current or prior experience" (p.80). For Kember et al. (2008), "Reflection operates through a

careful re-examination and evaluation of experience, beliefs and knowledge" (p. 370). There are different kinds of reflective approaches, for example, the use of journals and group discussions following practicum experiences that are not directed to a solution of a specific problem. Reaching the competencies set in the outcomes are achieved by students frequently reflecting throughout the project. They go through the following: (see Table 2)

    a. Individual self-assessment of competencies using program outcomes before the beginning of the project and putting individual aims.
    b. Individual Reflective questionnaires focusing on self-discoveries and setting the next steps.
    c. Group reflective questionnaire of how the idea was developed.
    d. Regular group reflective sessions supported by the mentor.
    e. Individual Reflective journal of what was learned in the program.

Frequent reflection helps them create their own cycle of plan, do, reflect, plan, do, reflect, and so on. With the support of a mentor, this cycle consolidates the sources of agency of intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness.

3. Conclusion

The knowledge students learn from reading books about different theories and concepts is important but insufficient (Weshop, 2013). Learning skills through action focuses on application, giving students opportunities to try and refine skills. The accumulation of skills/competencies learned through action and reflection build students' agency and enhance their ability to lead their lives. The program suggested takes students into a cyclic process of learning, applying, and reflecting, then learning and applying again. It carefully identifies what competencies first-year university students need and develops a path of application and reflection supported by mentors to monitor and assess learning.

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