

Assessing Transferable Skill Acquisition in a Healthcare-based Microcertification

Introduction

Employers search for employees with a suite of transferable skills, including interpersonal skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, analytical capabilities and resiliency (Business Council of Canada, 2018). Applicants are expected to possess these skills before being hired (Mitchell et al., 2010), and in employers' minds, these transferrable skills often trump the requirements for technical skills (Conference Board of Canada, 2022). Despite these expectations, many employers feel that Ontario postsecondary graduates lack these skills (Business Council of Canada, 2018; ACNielsen Research Services, 2000; Valenzuela, 2020).

Beyond interviews, employers use a range of strategies to ensure new hires have the transferable skills required to perform their new roles, including requiring candidates to complete tasks that simulate real work experience. Employers report that relying on students' self-assessments of their skills (e.g., those included in CVs and cover letters) is ineffective (City of London & Nesta, 2019). Accurate assessments of skills are especially important in a healthcare-based environment because recent graduates' communication, time management and teamwork skills can have a direct impact on their patients' wellbeing. In healthcare-related fields, scenario-based interview questions are often used as more reliable methods of determining applicants' skills (Oostrom et al., 2016), but concerns remain over graduates' transferrable skills.

During the pandemic, Ontario's shortage of personal support workers and supportive care assistants became critically important. In response, the Ontario government funded accelerated programs to equip students with the necessary skills to be successful in these positions (Agrba, 2021). Fanshawe College developed the Skills2Care (S2C) program as part of this initiative. This provincially funded microcertification specifically targeted at-risk and vulnerable student groups, engaging them in the process of learning and applying the skills needed to work as Supportive Care Assistants in the health care sector. The S2C was free to qualifying students and guaranteed a paid, four-week work placement.

This research project sought to answer the following question about the development of students' communication,¹ teamwork,² time management³ and cultural sensitivity⁴ skills: how do student self-assessments of transferrable skills and competencies compare to faculty and employer assessments of those skills at key times during the program?

Methodology

The research team developed a survey based on core transferable skills identified from the O*NET⁵ skills profile for 'Supportive Care Assistant.' Students, faculty and WIL employers responded to the same eight Likert-scaled statements and one open response question about students' skills, developed both in-class and in WIL settings (see Appendix A).

Sixty students completed skills assessments at three instances: at a pre-entry point to establish a baseline; at an interim point during the program; and at the completion of the work placement. Twenty-three program faculty members and 15 WIL employers provided feedback on student skills. Student (n=9), faculty (n=6) and employer (n=3) focus groups provided triangulation to confirm, or contextually challenge, findings from the quantitative survey data (see Appendix B).

Findings

Students self-rated their communication, teamwork, time management and cultural sensitivity skills very high at the onset of the program and consistently maintained those ratings until the completion of the program (Table 1). Scores ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with a higher score indicating a perception of stronger skills.

Table 1

Students' Skill Ratings at the Onset of the Program, at the End of Their Classes and at the End of Their Program and Work Term

¹ Communication was defined as: "Giving full attention to what other people are saying, taking time to understand the points being made, asking questions as appropriate, and not interrupting at inappropriate times; talking to others and effectively conveying information; reading and understanding written information and ideas; and communicating information and ideas in writing so others will understand."

² Teamwork was defined as: "Easily adjusting actions when one works with others with different needs, responsibilities, expertise and backgrounds."

³ Time Management was defined as: "Effectively managing one's time and activities to complete assigned tasks/duties."

⁴ Cultural Sensitivity was defined as: "Engaging clients in conversation, recognizing the importance of traditional teachings, foods, prayer and relationships (with self, family, community and land); recognizing and accepting the importance of Elders, traditional protocols and medicines, and ceremony for healing and adjusting to life changes."

⁵ For more information on the O*NET, please see NOC to O*Net Crosswalk; Vu, 2019; Labour Market Information Council, 2020; and *A Canadian Pathway to the O*NET: Linking Occupation Data Between Canada and the U.S.*

Skill	Functional Dimension	Pre-entry	End of Class	End of Work Term
Communication	Active listening	4.7	4.7	4.6
	Speaking	4.6	4.7	4.6
	Reading	4.7	4.6	4.7
	Writing	4.5	4.6	4.7
Teamwork	Coordination	4.6	4.8	4.6
Time Management	Monitoring	4.6	4.5	4.7
Cultural Sensitivity	Traditional teachings, foods, prayer; relationships	4.5	4.6	4.4
	Elders, protocols and medicines; ceremony	4.5	4.7	4.5

Note. This table shows student self-ratings of communication, teamwork, time management and cultural sensitivity skills at three points in their program: pre-entry, end of class, and end of work term.

Faculty and employers were generally in agreement about students' skills; both groups consistently rated student acquisition of skills lower than the students (see Table 2). Faculty rated *all* student skills significantly lower than the students, whereas employers rated only students' communication skills (active listening and reading) significantly lower. Employers rated students' teamwork and cultural sensitivity skills significantly higher than faculty though lower than the students.

Table 2

Comparison of Faculty, Student and Employers' Perceptions of Students' Skill Development

Functional Skill	Faculty-Student	Employer-Student	Faculty-Employer
Active listening	**	*(p=.003)	--
Speaking	**	--	--
Reading	**	*(p=.017)	--
Writing	**	--	--
Coordination (Teamwork)	**	--	*(p=.013)

Monitoring (Time management)	**	--	--
Traditional teachings, foods, prayer, relationships	**	--	--
Elders, protocols and medicines, ceremony	**	--	*(p=.037)

Note. This table compares faculty, employer and student perceptions of skill development for several functional skills, including: active listening, speaking, reading, writing, coordination, monitoring and cultural sensitivity. An ANOVA post hoc comparison for significant between-pairs differences using Tukey HSD test for significant mean difference between two groups.

** significant difference between groups (p<.001)

* significant difference between groups (p value)

-- no significant difference between groups

Feedback from focus groups with Indigenous participants indicated that the measurement of cultural sensitivity skills was insufficient. Specifically, participants noted that the two survey items that focused on Indigenous ways of knowing were too simplistic and incomplete. Feedback from two focus groups with indigenous community members was integrated with the Indigenous Cultural Safety Model (Northern Health Indigenous Health, n.d.) to revise the tool for future research. The revised assessment tool can be found in Appendix C.

Discussion and Conclusion

Students, faculty and employers had dissimilar perceptions of students’ skill development over the course of the S2C microcertification. These results align with multiple studies that explore transferrable skill perceptions: in each, students viewed their transferable skills more favourably relative to employer and faculty evaluations (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Valenzuela, 2020; Lee, 2021). Valenzuela (2020) argues that students view their soft skills more favourably “[because students have] not yet experienced any specific difficulties because of soft skills’ deficiencies on the job” (p. 133).

The S2C study revealed a major discrepancy between student and faculty/employer perceptions of communication skills. Other studies similarly noted that students tend to rate their communication skills highly while faculty consider them in need of improvement (Lee, 2021; Taylor, 2016; Valenzuela, 2020). This divergence is important given that employers often cite strong communication skills as one of the principle skills they look for in new hires (Business Council of Canada, 2018).

Differences between perceptions found across multiple studies suggest that context plays a significant role (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Lee, 2021; Valenzuela, 2020). In the S2C study, faculty and employers had the same skill assessment tools, yet diverged in opinion

on students' teamwork skills, indicating that different contexts — academic and workplace — affected perceptions of skill development and articulation. Students' and employers' assessments of teamwork skills were aligned, indicating that students' understandings of 'teamwork' aligned more closely with employer definitions and were associated with the practical world of work, rather than more abstract academic definitions.

Divergent perceptions of skills highlight the necessity of using multiple measures from different contexts to assess student skill acquisition accurately. In this study, feedback from focus groups with Indigenous participants indicated that the single survey tool used to measure cultural sensitivity skills was inadequate. Skill measurement using multiple lenses (student, faculty and employer) and different tools (both authentic assessments, such as self-reflections, along with large-scale assessments) may be a more effective approach to provide realistic skill assessment in training programs (Kaufman & Pichette, 2022). Joordens et al. (2019) similarly concluded that multiple measures of students' transferrable skills (peer, teaching assistants and professors) could be used to measure students' skills more accurately.

Assessing students' transferrable skills is a complex undertaking. Individuals in different contexts — academic and the workplace — think about and assess skills differently. Future initiatives to develop and measure students' skills should aim to use multiple tools to triangulate skill development.

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Appendix A: Skills Assessment Questionnaires

A five-point Likert scale, consisting of the following options, was used for all of the questions: 1: strongly agree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree or disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree and 6: not applicable.

Student Skills Assessment Questionnaire

I am able to:

1. Give full attention to what other people are saying and take time to understand the points being made.
2. Talk to others and effectively convey information.
3. Read and understand written information and ideas.
4. Communicate information and ideas in writing so others will understand.
5. Easily adjust my approach when I work with individuals who have different needs, responsibilities, expertise and backgrounds than my own.
6. Effectively manage my own time to complete assigned tasks/duties by set deadlines.
7. Engage Indigenous clients in conversation, recognizing the importance of traditional teachings, foods, prayer and relationships (with self, family, community and land).
8. Recognize and accept the importance of Indigenous Elders, traditional protocols, medicines and ceremony for healing and adjusting to life changes.
9. What skill or skills do you want to improve during your in-class learning? (Open text response).

Faculty and Employer Post-class/WIL Assessment of Student Skills Questionnaire

The student is able to:

1. Give full attention to what other people are saying and take time to understand the points being made.
2. Talk to others and effectively convey information.
3. Read and understand written information and ideas.
4. Communicate information and ideas in writing so others will understand.
5. Easily adjust my approach when I work with individuals who have different needs, responsibilities, expertise and backgrounds than my own.
6. Effectively manage my own time to complete assigned tasks/duties by set deadlines.
7. Engage Indigenous clients in conversation, recognizing the importance of traditional teachings, foods, prayer and relationships (with self, family, community and land).

8. Recognize and accept the importance of Indigenous Elders, traditional protocols, medicines and ceremony for healing and adjusting to life changes,
9. What skill or skills did you observe to be the most challenging for students to learn or improve? (Open text response).

Appendix B: Focus Group Question Guides

Student Experience Focus Group Question Guide

1. How did you hear about the Supportive Care Assistant Program?
 - What was most attractive about the program?
 - Did you have challenges connecting or getting information?
2. Describe your experiences with the recruitment and selection program.
 - What surprised you about the program?
 - How easy was it to enrol? Did you have any challenges meeting requirements?
 - What was most helpful to your successful enrolment?
 - A person or support? Information? Prior experience?
 - Is there one thing the program could do differently to better recruit and support incoming students?
3. Describe your in-class learning experience.
 - What worked well for you? What was your biggest challenge to learning success?
 - Who did you go to for help? Did you make use of program supports and services?
 - Is there one support or service that was most helpful to you?
 - Did your in-class learning meet your expectation?
 - Is there one thing the program can do to improve students' in-class learning experience?
4. Describe your work-integrated learning experience.
 - How did your work-integrated learning experience improve your ability to provide professional health care services?
 - What skills did you develop the most during your work placement?
 - Was there a missing support or service that would have improved your work placement experience?
 - Did your placement meet your expectations?
5. Thinking about employment after graduation ...
 - Do have a preference to work in a community or private care setting? If so, why?
 - Have you started your job search?
 - Will you make use of employment services offered by the program?
6. Was there any one part of the Supportive Care Assistant Program that stood out to you as the most helpful?

- Would you recommend this program to your friends and family? Why or why not?

Faculty Teaching Experience Focus Group Question Guide

1. How did you come to teach in this program? What was attractive about it?
2. How did you adjust to teaching practices to meet the varied learning needs of marginalized students having varied prior success with learning and employment?
 - What resources did you draw on to make those practice adjustments?
 - Did you have the supports you needed to teach successfully? What was missing?
3. Can you identify advantages to pairing in-class training with work-integrated learning? For the instructor? For the students? For future employment?
 - Do you think this pairing may have a larger impact on success for particular students or groups?
4. Is there a particular strength you can identify in students who were successful in this program?
5. What is one piece of guidance or information you would pass on to peers considering teaching in a similar program?

WIL-Employer Experience Focus Group Question Guide

1. How did you come to be a work-integrated employer for the Supportive Care Assistant Program?
 - Did you have prior experience providing student work placements?
 - Describe the key factor for you to engage with this program.
2. How did you adjust to supervision practices for students in this particular program?
 - Did you use particular resources to make those changes? What was missing?
3. Can you identify advantages to pairing in-class training with work-integrated learning?

For the employer? For the students? For future employment?
 - Do you think this pairing may have a larger impact on success for particular students or groups?
4. Is there a particular strength you can identify in students who were successful in your work-integrated learning placements?

5. What are the advantages for employers to hire graduates from this type of program?
 - o Do they need to do anything differently to successfully onboard these students?
6. Share one piece of guidance or information you would pass on to peers considering the role of a work-integrated learning employer with a similar program.

Student Early Program Exit Interview Question Guide

1. Was there a primary reason for your withdrawal? Personal? Financial? Readiness? Fit? Academic?
2. Were there particular students you preferred to work with? Why was that?
3. Did you talk to any instructors or program staff before deciding to withdraw?
4. What was your biggest challenge in the program?
5. Are you interested in enrolling in a similar program in the future?
6. Is there anything the college or program could have done differently to support you in this program?

Summative Program Evaluation Focus Group Question Guides

1. Provide your feedback on the target audience for this program.
 - o Did this program effectively reach and serve the intended population?
 - o Describe any barriers to recruiting students from the planned target groups.
 - o Describe any barriers faced by either training or hiring employers.
2. Provide your feedback on key outcome indicators for this program.
 - o To what degree were student learning objectives met?
 - o To what degree did students effectively demonstrate required skills in the classroom and in their work placement?
 - o Were there any job skills that particularly challenged students during their learning experience?
 - o Did you observe any positive or negative unintended outcomes for this program?
3. In what ways, if any, did program delivery vary from the planned implementation? Provide your understanding of any difference.
4. To what degree, if any, did the program lack resources needed to succeed?

- In what ways, if any, would you recommend modifying the program structure?
 - In what ways, if any, would you recommend modifying program elements or activities?
5. Please provide brief feedback on your perceptions of the overall impact of this program.
- Why was it important that students successfully completed this program and found care-giving employment in the region?
 - What was the biggest success you observed during your engagement with this program?
 - What, if any, were the particular features of the program and context that made a difference to participating students and communities?

Appendix C: Revised Cultural Sensitivity Assessment Tool

Action/Competency Statement	Functional Dimension ⁶
<p>I use reflective practice as part of my commitment to life-long learning about myself and others.</p> <p>I recognize the importance and strength of Indigenous Elders — their stories, rituals, and traditional medicines — in grounding an individual to their culture.</p> <p>I understand authentic caregiving is based in relationship-building and I must take time to learn the context of each Indigenous client in order to provide optimal care.</p>	Cultural humility
<p>I actively learn the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada.</p> <p>I have read the '94 calls to action' and identified at least one key action I can take to broaden my understanding of Indigenous cultures.</p> <p>Briefly describe the importance of land acknowledgment for Indigenous peoples [open text].</p>	Cultural awareness
<p>I recognize how the dominant Canadian culture has evolved impersonal and transactional health care services.</p> <p>I understand Indigenous identity is person-oriented, empathetic, grounded in storytelling and draws from personal experience.</p>	Cultural sensitivity

⁶ Dimensions are drawn from the Indigenous Cultural Safety Model (Northern Health Indigenous Health, n.d.).

<p>I understand how central community is to Indigenous peoples and their physical, mental and spiritual well-being.</p>	
<p>I understand the history of residential and day schools and the impacts of those traumatic/post-traumatic experiences on individuals, families and communities.</p> <p>I understand intergenerational trauma and how those experiences impact Indigenous individuals, families, communities and cultures.</p> <p>I understand there are different entry points for individual into Indigenous identity and am able to communicate with individuals of different ages and experiences.</p>	<p>Cultural competency</p>
<p>I understand relationships in health care are different for Indigenous peoples and are strongly influenced by historical cultural traumas.</p> <p>I understand how I move, gesture and speak in caregiving interactions can result in a trajectory of trust or avoidance.</p> <p>I understand that a central caregiver role is to reinforce a commitment to client well-being and accept each Indigenous client as a person</p>	<p>Cultural safety</p>