Accessible and Everyday OHS: enhancing employability and increasing awareness

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A team of legal educators at Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne regards Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) as a vital practical and conceptual literacy that enhances both students’ employability and safety. A recent project provided the chance to develop general OHS curriculum for use at various stages of the student experience including during Orientation, in class-based curriculum and throughout students’ work placements. The assessment was designed to enable students to meet the requirements of the competency Contribute to Workplace Safety, a minimum standard for OHS from the Public Service Training Package.

The OHS curriculum uses everyday situations and objects that students and workers in a knowledge economy might encounter habitually. As well as the more dramatic tripping, slipping, falling and other physical injuries, this curriculum uses everyday topics such as pens, computers, chairs, stress, teamwork, the internet and headphones and aims to shift students’ perspectives about what constitutes OHS, heighten their awareness of risk and develop their capacity to mitigate risk. The aim is not to develop a technical proficiency that would mitigate risk in a particular profession or location but to achieve a conceptual shift about health and safety, what constitutes risk and who is responsible. The focus of this paper is based on the work of the project team and will examine the design of engaging and accessible OHS curriculum, where OHS activities might be embedded into an undergraduate degree, who might be involved in OHS curriculum and, finally, what OHS assessment should be undertaken prior to and during a work placement.

Keywords: Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), employability, curriculum.

OHS Curriculum: who’s responsible?

The Health and Safety of students is not the exclusive domain of specialists in Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) units. OHS cannot be relegated to a page of information in the student diary, a website of OHS policies or an information session during Orientation week: it is far too important, pervasive and diverse for any or all of those sorts of treatments. In this paper, we argue that it is the responsibility of educators at every level in every degree to equip students with general OHS knowledge and awareness to safely operate at work, at university, on the way to university and while undertaking university-related activities off campus. While some discipline areas should, indeed must, rely on the expertise of specialists – such as nursing, chemistry, engineering or psychology – for many students who are already knowledge workers or who are likely to be, OHS is “everyday”, common sense, all too familiar and all too easily ignored. For most workers, OHS does not concern dangerous machinery and hazardous chemicals. It is, perhaps, less visible and has less gruesome outcomes than the images that dominate Victoria’s Work Safe campaign featuring intensely physical workplace accidents. Such incidents are real and cause great distress but OHS is broader than accidents on building sites, industrial kitchens and factories. Other OHS-related incidents, including stress, bullying and depression combine with more physical accidents to cost the Australian economy an estimated $57.9 billion (O’Neill, 2009) annually. Clearly, OHS matters.

The event of students undertaking work placement seems to galvanize educational institutions into some OHS activity. Many educators are aware of the potential risks faced by students in the workplace and universities need to meet OHS responsibilities. Victorian University (VU) in Melbourne has industry engagement at the heart of its curriculum. Its Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) Policy requires industry engagement in every degree. Yet, OHS at VU is a rather piecemeal affair. Business and Arts students – despite the same pressure to develop their employability skills as their Engineering, Health Sciences and Chemistry counterparts – get little in the way of OHS training or awareness. And those Engineering, Health Sciences and Chemistry counterparts get little in the way of OHS that is not discipline-specific or focused on technicist, specialist concerns.

VU’s general response for the need to provide OHS information to students on placement is on a website. The site mentions the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 noting that “All workplaces are required by law to provide a workplace environment that is safe and without risks to health” (VU, 2010). Students are advised to “take reasonable care for their own safety and the safety of others; and comply with any OHS policies, procedures, practices and directions of the host organisation” (VU, 2010). The site stresses the need to ensure that host organisations have an OHS policy and procedures, that the student will receive induction to OHS at the workplace and that the workplace is monitored to ensure OHS requirements are being maintained. The idea that “If students believe their workplace to be
unsafe…they should approach their workplace supervisor in the first instance…” (VU, 2010) sounds reasonable enough. But what situations might be unsafe or place students at risk? What do students know of psycho-social risks? How might their student-status make them vulnerable? (Tully, Kropf & Price, 1993). How prepared are students to identity or mitigate OHS risks?

Threats to students’ health and safety in the workplace are very real and emanate from people, situations, the environment and objects. Obviously particular professions and industries present particular risks and hazards. Professions such as social work and teaching, for example, have had consistent reports of workers (and students on placement) suffering verbal and physical violence and fear (Tully, Kropf & Price, 1993). Although the banking industry suffers less violent crime than in previous decades (Bunn & Guthrie, 2009), the threat of violence for workers in that sector remains considerable. Health care professionals, community services workers and people working in the law enforcement sector are all at risk – working in isolation, visiting people at home, dealing with people who may be drug affected (Mayhew, 2000). A spate of publicised assaults on taxi drivers (2010–2011) served to remind the public that taxi driving, a common occupation of international students, is “one of the most hazardous occupations because of the risks involved” (Mayhew, 2000; Machin & DeSouza, 2004). Taxi drivers in Australia suffer “28 times the rate of non-sexual assault and 67 times the rate of robbery compared to the community at large” (Machin & DeSouza, 2004). Quite simply, accidents, incidents and occupational violence are problems “with significant legal, economic, and emotional consequences” (Mayhew, 2000). The employability skills discussion should make OHS a more visible theme if governments, universities and businesses want to equip and empower students to be active, productive and safe workers of the future.

Emslie (2010) argues that universities, governments and employers need to have a more systematic and pro-active role in “strengthening efforts to manage risk in work placements and adequately prepare students” (39). It is clear that universities have a duty of care to prepare students about OHS for placement. However, not all students undertake work placement and many students are already at work. There is a general need for an inclusive program of broad OHS awareness for all students.

**OHS: safe students and work readiness for all VU graduates**

Legal educators at the Sir Zelman Cowen Centre for continuing legal education at VU identify eight key legal literacies⁴ that all workers in any role in any Australian work place should have. Legal literacies should be prominent in discussions of employability and work readiness. Of the legal literacies, OHS demands immediate attention in the curriculum. A Teaching and Learning Grant in 2010 provided the opportunity for a team of legal educators to develop general OHS curriculum for all students: Occupational Health and Safety: Safe students and an essential element of work readiness for all VU graduates. The project emphasises that an awareness of OHS risks and legislation is vital to all students – whether they are on work placement or whether they are graduates. General OHS awareness is also relevant to students in their part-time work as casual employees are often overlooked in OHS induction and training (Worksafe, 2006). The significant challenge for curriculum developers in the project was that, while everyone seems to agree that OHS curriculum is important, that it should be embedded in a whole-of-course approach and that the content should be generic rather than technical (Pisaniello et al, 2010), it is not easy to decide what should be included. This OHS curriculum needed to be suitable for every VU student in every discipline so the purpose of the project was not to recreate all of the specialist OHS material relevant to particular professions or disciplines – chemistry students working in labs with chemicals have OHS procedures embedded into every activity, engineering students working with soldering irons have been taught to participate in that activity safely and nursing students know how to identify and deal with biohazards. All of these areas are discipline-specific and so not suited to a general audience or, necessarily, to students as students or students who work part time.

**OHS Curriculum Content**

OHS can be highly specialised and yet OHS is also, as a general competency, extremely broad. There are OHS elements inherent in every situation encompassing environmental, social, psychological and physical elements. Even an OHS curriculum focused on generic student and knowledge worker situations presents a broad array of topics – and not everything can be ‘covered’. So, inspired by the oxymoronic maxim, “Cover less, uncover more”, curriculum developers worked to develop activities that would shift students’ perception rather than ‘cover’ content. There is, as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) report *Safeguarding Australians* emphasises, a lack of an agreed core body of knowledge for OHS and “the challenge is to secure a cogent blend of knowledge and skills from the

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⁴ The eight legal literacies that should contribute to students’ employability and overall safety include: Occupational Health and Safety (OHS); Duty of care; Equal Opportunity; Discrimination; Privacy; Conflict of Interest; Legislative and Policy Regulatory Frameworks and Codes of Conduct.
disparate disciplines” (Toft et al, 2010: 3). This project, however, did not blend various disciplinary OHS knowledge and skills; it aimed to focus on the common characteristics and behaviours of students as students, as graduates needing to address OHS criteria in the recruitment process and as future workers needing to have a general sense of their legal rights and responsibilities in the workplace.

**OHS: Safe students and an essential element of work readiness for all VU graduates** created a range of online resources to develop students’ understanding of mandatory legal requirements for employers, workers and workplaces and to raise awareness of OHS. The project assumes that an understanding of OHS is essential for all students to both ensure that they contribute to their own and others’ safety and as an employability skill. A competency from Vocational Education – **Contribute to Workplace Safety** – provides the basis for the resources that aim to ensure that VU graduates can contribute to workplace safety, even if that workplace is the university. This competency was selected as it is a minimum level requirement for the Australian public service and comes from the Public Sector Training Package.

**Curriculum Design**

Ironically, by focusing on the real, actual and the everyday, the OHS curriculum created in this project develops students’ more abstract problem solving skills to mitigating OHS risk while beginning with what they already know, use or do. This approach is underpinned by constructivist learning theory which encourages students to create their own knowledge. The curriculum uses what students already know as a starting point from which to build OHS-specific understanding (Biggs, 2003). Beyond developing an awareness of the OHS Act and some of its implications (for example, ensuring that students understand that employers are responsible for their safety only insofar as it is “reasonably practicable” or that employees are also responsible for complying with safety requirements and taking precautionary measures to avoid risks), there is no content as such. Rather, the curriculum aims to create awareness or a shift in perception through the centuries old idea of making the familiar strange (Chandler, 2001). Various education and psycho-social theories underpin this approach to curriculum development (Wagoner, 2008).

A more histrionic approach to teaching OHS seems to be a focus on accidents and horror stories – and certainly there are enough statistics about OHS costs, accidents and incidents to shock most people. But the high costs to workplaces, individuals and communities (O’Neill, 2009) can be abstract to students. One approach sometimes adopted in training is to try to personalise OHS incidents with “what if?” scenarios – what if that were you, what if that happened to your mother, sister, father – and this approach can work well in class-based discussions. For the online resources, however, a different approach was adopted that sought to make the familiar unfamiliar (Wagoner, 2008). Common, everyday objects such as headphones, chairs, laptops and pens are introduced and then students’ usual sense of what these objects mean is disrupted. Each image or word or object is typically “anchored” (Barthes, 1964) in the social discourse in a way that helps readers to ‘read’ the text. So a chair in a classroom is not likely to be interpreted in a way that associates it with danger and an image of headphones will most likely connote ideas of music. Unless there was something obviously wrong with it, a chair would just be regarded as furniture in an educational setting – it is normalised or conventionalised in that setting (Wagoner, 2008). Similarly, an image of headphones will be “routinized” (Hawkes, 1977 in Wagoner, 2008) so that they will not be perceived as remotely hazardous. By re-anchoring everyday objects in the discourse of OHS whereby danger or risk become the super-ordinate meaning, objects come to have other meanings associated with risk or hazards. Because chairs do not automatically connote danger, there is room for creativity to achieve this shift in perception: “we take a thing out of its conventional setting and explanation and represent it in a new incongruity context (making the familiar unfamiliar)” (Wagoner, 2008: 469). Wagoner (2008) uses Burke’s idea of “perspective of incongruity” and creates a new perspective through the incongruity of associating chairs, pens, laptops or headphones with falling, choking deaths, toasted skin syndrome or hearing loss. By making an unconventional link between a non-threatening object and danger and, in effect, re-categorising objects, students step outside conventional signifying system and generate new meanings. The association of pens and writing is replaced by pens and choking. A laptop on a lap is not normalised: rather, it becomes a dangerous image associated with toasted skin syndrome or infertility.

**Curriculum Delivery**

The curriculum is completely online and modularised although students are encouraged to complete some activities in real spaces – including work spaces. Students can complete the modules as a separate unit but the preferred mode of delivery would see the various activities and sections embedded in a whole-of-course approach and completed by students at appropriate stages in their degree. The module Safe Students could be done both as part of Orientation activities and throughout a first semester; the various activities in a WIL (work-integrated learning) module that focuses on WIL activities – such as team work, interviewing people in a workplace, working alone or working remotely – could be optional and only completed if assessment tasks require students to undertake those activities; the module on the
OHS Act would be appropriate for students in part-time work, students going on placement or students about to graduate. The module How to address OHS questions at interview would also be useful for all cohorts. The Safe Students module especially uses everyday objects as sites for learning. By using everyday situations and artefacts such as teamwork, computers, chairs and headphones as discussion points, it is possible to shift students’ perspectives about what constitutes OHS, heighten their awareness of risk and develop their capacity to mitigate risk. The aim is not to develop in students a technical proficiency that would mitigate risk in a particular profession but to achieve a conceptual change and to increase their legal literacy in respect to OHS.

Conclusion

The question of who is responsible for developing students’ OHS knowledge (Bates et al., 2007) will continue until someone claims responsibility for this vital educational, ethical and legal area. OHS is relevant to all workers, to students in part-time work or on placement and to students ‘at work’ at university. The need for OHS savvy workers is clear from reports on the national cost of work-related injuries (O’Neill, 2009). While there are recommendations for OHS to be embedded in high school curriculum (Pisaniello et al., 2010), they remain recommendations. With the rhetorical push combined with funding incentives for universities to develop graduates’ employability skills and enhance employability (Woodley & Marshall, 2012), it would seem that the OHS curriculum sits very comfortably in the undergraduate degree.

References


Appendix: Community-Based-Learning Questions

1. Why is CBL important to Christchurch now?
2. What are the barriers to developing CBL at UC?
3. What are the assets to developing CBL at UC?
4. What are the advantages of developing CBL at UC?
5. What will happen if UC doesn’t develop CBL?
6. What do you think of the critique that UC is using the disaster to profit?
7. What did the earthquake do?
Appendix A. Venn Diagram of WIL Activities

*Depending on the actual structure of the activity this might be high or low community engagement

Figure 1: Selected examples of potential WIL activities