



# DEVELOPING EMPLOYABILITY SKILL ARTICULATION IN COLLEGE STUDENTS: A FRAMEWORK AND PRACTITIONER APPROACHES FOR CO-CURRICULAR EDUCATORS

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**K**at, the executive director of a campus programming board, walks into her advisor's office asking them to look over her resume. She's been an exceptional leader on campus for a few years, and her capabilities are apparent. She consistently showcases skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving at a high caliber. Unfortunately, the position is hidden at the bottom of Kat's resume with just two generic bullet points underneath. For many co-curricular educators, this is likely a familiar story.

Many have written about the importance of employability skills and on creating collegiate initiatives to help develop those skills, especially in campus activities. Employers often claim soft skills are equally important in hiring decisions as a candidate's field knowledge (Hart Research Associates, 2013; Clark, Marsden, Whyatt, Thompson, & Walker, 2015). Several studies show students believe their co-curricular experiences strengthen their employability skill sets (Griffin, Peck, & LaCount, 2017; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015; Clark et al., 2015). However, data from Gallup, the National Association of Colleges and Employers, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities show that students and employers consistently disagree on how prepared students are in these skills, with employers perceiving students to lack the skills that students believe themselves to have (Bauer-Wolf, 2018). Many believe this is evidence of a skills gap and call for higher education to address the issue by better preparing students; however, a growing contingent of educators believe the true problem is a skills articulation gap between students and employers (DuRose & Stebleton, 2016; Goodwin, Goh, Verkoeyen, & Lithgow, 2019; Watkins & McKeown, 2018). It's insufficient for co-curricular educators to help students develop skills; we must also educate students on how to articulate them (Brown, 2015; Kruger & Peck, 2017).

It's like teaching a child to read—identifying words on a page is an important first step, but reading doesn't become useful until one can understand those words and create meaning with them. Employability skills are both the "language and currency" of the job market, and so students must become adept at using them (Pretti & Fannon, 2018, p. 108). Identifying and articulating skills will not only help students with resumes and job interviews; it will also aid in applying skills when faced with new situations (Brown, 2015).

Some universities implement large scale initiatives assisting students in developing personal skills recognition and articulation capability (Lawhead, Bouldin, & Simpson, 2017; Peck et al., 2016), but other institutions cannot offer such programs. So, if a co-curricular educator values developing student skill articulation but is unable to implement large scale initiatives, what can be done? This article aims to put skill articulation development into a clear context and offer strategies to co-curricular educators wishing to incorporate skill articulation development into their practice.

## ON DEVELOPING SKILL ARTICULATION: A FRAMEWORK AND SUGGESTED PRACTICES

While numerous studies explore skill development, studies examining skill articulation building are limited. The few studies which have been conducted on the topic take place in curricular settings. However, these studies show skill articulation to be a teachable skill (Goodwin, Goh, Verkoeyen, & Lithgow, 2019; Brumm, Mickelson, & White, 2006; Lackner & Martini, 2017), and the findings can translate to the co-curricular realm.

Co-curricular educators require a clear framework to inform their practice in working with students to develop skill articulation. Building skill articulation should work in conjunction with skill development rather than as a capstone to it. However, such work requires co-curricular educators to focus on skill articulation throughout their work with students – as they develop their skills, rather than waiting until just before interviews or graduation. Brown (2015) asserted that faculty and staff have a responsibility in making skills recognition and articulation a priority, and to do so in an explicit and transparent way.

For students to successfully articulate their skills, articulation development must be integrated into skills learning. Peck and Preston proposed in their Co-curricular Career Connections Leadership Model that skill development occurs through a five-part progression of first gaining awareness of a skill, followed by acquiring, applying, advancing, and articulating that skill (2018). This progression aids co-curricular educators in understanding how a student proceeds through developing a skill and touches on aspects of skill articulation. Equally helpful to co-curricular educators would be a similar progression of how students develop the ability to articulate a skill during its development so that these educators can incorporate practices to assist in the growth of both skills and the ability to articulate them.

To develop such a framework, co-curricular educators may want to consider the tenets of Bruner's work on educational scaffolding. Bruner proposed that the educator assists the learner to reach higher levels of thinking by constantly operating at the edge of the learner's competence (1986). Bruner further suggested that when an educator uses foresight in their methodology and guides the learner's focus, they advance the learner through growing stages of complexity until the intended level of competence is achieved.

Based on this theory, it seems clear that skills articulation develops through four scaffolded levels: skill naming and defining, skill awareness and identification, connecting to skills while building evidence, and skill articulation and transference. These scaffolds do not exist independently, though a focus is placed on a particular level of the scaffold at any given time. Strengthening the base scaffolds grants better stability when working on scaffolds at a higher level. The four scaffolds will be discussed through the remainder of the article along with practices individuals can implement into their work.

### SKILL NAMING AND DEFINING

Before a student can be expected to articulate their skills, we must first instill in students the vocabulary to do so (Pretti & Fannon, 2018). It may sound obvious, but, as Peck and Preston emphasized, educators mustn't overlook the baseline knowledge students must possess to build skill articulation (2018). The act of naming has particular power in making knowledge more accessible, as language is the vehicle that allows one to order their thoughts (Bruner, 1986). We might "know" something, but putting the knowledge into words seems just out of grasp until it has a name. Think back to early elementary school. You knew if a pencil rolled off your desk, it would fall. You may have ignored the process since it was so expected, but you then learned the reason for this constant occurrence was called gravity. Possessing the name allowed you to learn more about the concept and its implications as well as the ability to discuss it with others. Naming and defining, in some sense, is what made this concept real and relevant to your life. The same is true of employability skills. Students are already developing skills and may recognize areas in which they excel or struggle. But until a student connects a name to the skill, the skill only exists in the background of their world. Learning skills vocabulary allows students to recognize when using

a particular skill, reflect on skill use, strengthen skills, and begin discussing skills.

It is also critical for students to possess terms and definitions because employability skills language tends to be fluid with no universally agreed-upon terms or definitions, thus contributing to the skills articulation gap (Bauer-Wolf, 2018). Arming students with an ability to both classify and offer a clear definition of a skill in their own words better prepares students to discuss skills.

Co-curricular educators must ensure skills terminology exists in our practice. First, we must make the terms accessible and incorporate them into our programming. Skills language can be incorporated into work with students by including a session about skills into student training programs. Learning objectives should be created that expand students' skill language. Co-curricular educators can incorporate skills terminology into office marketing and signage, ensuring student exposure to the terminology.

The best way for co-curricular educators to impart skills language is by using the vocabulary and authentically integrating skills language into conversations with students. The personal connections we have with students can be our role's most influential aspect. Discussing the skills we've seen students apply can build a more robust "skills vocabulary" in our students. By displaying skills terminology in our practice, we better prepare students to articulate skills. Equally important, this language gives students the tools necessary for the second scaffold by providing names and descriptions to identify skill use.

## SKILL AWARENESS AND IDENTIFICATION

If a person is asked to walk across the room, they don't spend the next seven seconds thinking "pick up my right foot, now move it forward a little, now put it down, now shift my weight to it, now pick up my left foot...", nor do they think "begin walking". Articulating the "skill" of walking requires unpacking the mental shortcuts involved. Articulating employability skills can be similar. Students can build skill awareness and identify skills in action only once the ability to name and define skills exists (Pretti & Fannon, 2018). Moving students from implicitly using skills to recognizing skill use is the goal in this scaffold. Student thinking must shift to allow skill awareness and identification to occur while students are doing, while they exercise a skill. Such awareness allows students to reflect on how they implement the skill and what occurs during the skill's use. This process aligns with two stages of Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), requiring a concrete experience and having students observe and reflect on that experience.

Co-curricular educators can assist students in this scaffold by providing a means for timely reflection and helping students recognize skill use. In working with a student organization, reflection can be incorporated through written or verbal prompt exercises during meetings. One method is to ask students to take a few minutes to identify a situation within the last week where they've used a skill and then write out a bullet point for their resume. Or, instead of a written reflection, this can be accomplished by requiring students to work with a partner to describe the situation and skill, followed by sharing with the entire group. Again, co-curricular educators should live the example by giving formative feedback and offering observations of a student's skill use they have seen.

Making students aware of their skill use creates an increased sense of the existence of these skills. No longer are skills detached concepts; they transform into real tools students possess even if previously unaware. Now that students have become aware of when skills are being utilized, students will be able to analyze their skill usage and see their personal development while documenting their skill growth.

## CONNECTING TO SKILLS WHILE BUILDING EVIDENCE

The third scaffold builds on skill awareness but requires students to go beyond simple identification. Students should now recognize skill use automatically, allowing them to shift their focus to assessing their caliber of a given skill and reflect on the skill's development. Students can only build articulation once they have the opportuni-

ties to “reflect on their skills, draw on evidence to support their development and be proactive about furthering their skill set” (Watkins & McKeown, 2018, p. 91).

This scaffold encompasses the whole cycle of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984)—concrete experiences and opportunities for observation and reflection are still important, with increased opportunities for conceptualization and experimentation of employability skills. Students can sense and begin to describe the quality of their skills in a given situation, allowing them to reflect on skill development and build ownership of their skills.

While students build personal connections to the skills used, they may also begin to collect examples for evidencing their skills in a discussion. Identifying personal anecdotes of skills in practice helps to convey preparedness in conversations and allows the ability to examine personal skill growth by comparing past experiences with more current ones.

Reflection is critical in this stage. We can borrow from service-learning pedagogy put forth by Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996), implementing their 4C’s of Critical Reflection—continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized. Tweaking their concepts to reflect skill development proves a natural fit. Reflection on skill development is ongoing, occurring before, during, and after situations when students use skills. Reflection should connect to both the individual and their experience implementing particular skills to create personal meaning-making. The reflection should challenge the student’s existing beliefs regarding their skills to generate new or deeper perspectives, and the reflection must be contextualized to each situation and that student’s level of mastery of the given skill.

Co-curricular educators can help students develop on this scaffold by implementing various reflective techniques that allow students to appraise their skill use and arrange for students to receive formative feedback. Again, this reflection should go beyond identification and examine how skills are used, to what extent, and with how much success. Co-curricular educators can adapt the think/pair/share and resume bullet activities in the previous section to fit this end. Group discussions allowing students to talk through experiences and receive peer feedback can build perspective. Rubrics allow excellent opportunities to help students assess their level of skill and skill growth. These rubrics can be provided, but a better method may be asking students to create the rubrics themselves. Personally crafted rubrics add additional reflection and incorporate components that reinforce students defining skills in their own terms, setting clear definitions, and describing what increasing proficiency at a skill means. Co-curricular educators should use open-ended questions with students to help students dive deeply into their experiences.

Aiding students in critically reflecting on their skills builds self-authorship over their experiences. Providing students a means to connect with their experiences and skill development also helps students improve their capabilities when faced with similar situations. Armed with connections to their skills and a body of evidence, students can draw on these resources to have clearer conversations.

## SKILL ARTICULATION AND TRANSFERENCE

Having strengthened each previous scaffold, students are now ready to stand atop the structure they’ve developed and use the tools acquired to articulate their skills in a meaningful way. A focus should also be put on helping students understand how to transfer their skills to new situations. Perkins (2009) tells a story about a physics instructor who assigns countless problems of objects falling off towers to allow students to practice a standard physics formula. On exam day, a student complains the test isn’t fair because all the homework was about things falling off towers, but the test question is about an object falling down a hole. We must ensure students understand that while situations appear different, the skills required are often the same. Skills developed on a campus programming board would be useless if this weren’t the case; it is doubtful that many alumni will be involved with such an organization after graduation.

Co-curricular educators must give students ample experience to practice skill articulation and to recognize

the transferability of their skills. Possessing a response format that showcases their skill aids students in better articulation. The STAR (Situation/Task, Action, Result) interview response technique improves student skill articulation in interview settings when explicitly taught in an academic course's scope, likely due to students' newfound familiarity and confidence from exposure to this approach (Goodwin, Goh, Verkoeyen, & Lithgow, 2019; Brumm, Mickelson, & White, 2006; Lackner & Martini, 2017). In this format, a respondent answers a behavioral interview question by identifying a past situation or task, describing the action taken, and then describing the result and any lessons learned, thus demonstrating a candidate's familiarity with the necessary skill.

Co-curricular educators can implement practices with STAR in various ways to aid students in developing articulation ability and understanding how their skills transfer, including written reflections, group discussions, oral presentations, creation of ePortfolios, and videotaped mock interviews. Additionally, co-curricular educators can integrate these concepts in ways the typical academic curriculum does not allow. For instance, offering meetings to students after leadership position interviews to reflect on the experience and receive formative feedback takes a minor time investment. Co-curricular involvement also provides opportunities for students to see examples of their peers' articulation skills. One beneficial practice involves including graduating student officers on the hiring committee when selecting officers for the next year. The opportunity allows seniors to experience the alternate side of an interview and can provide a benchmark to compare their interview techniques with others. Students can reflect on what they found compelling and identify shortcomings they can work to avoid. If this practice proves too controversial or out of reach, have small groups of students conduct peer mock interviews, which still allows students to learn from one another in action and adds an element of formative assessment from their peers. Another practice is holding group resume crafting sessions, where students can riff off of one another to develop strongly articulated descriptions that capture their capabilities.

Just like the other skills being developed, the skill of articulating and transferring skills improves with practice. Providing low-stakes methods allows students to experiment and sharpen their ability in skill articulation. Such practice is crucial for building both the capability and confidence necessary when stakes are higher. It also builds a foundation of articulating personal performance students can use throughout their careers.

## CONCLUSION

The scaffolds described are of use to co-curricular educators by outlining a clear understanding of the components needed for building student skill articulation. Keeping these four scaffolds in mind allows co-curricular educators to integrate practices that develop students capable of closing the skills articulation gap. Further, these practices can also strengthen employability skills development by providing students with a deeper understanding and intentional reflection. However, to fully understand the process of building articulation skills in students and identify methods to prepare them best, more focus on the topic is necessary. Research initiatives to explore building skill articulation in students will better inform co-curricular educators' practices to meet this crucial need.

While this article focuses on methods for co-curricular educators to implement individually, they are not alone in building skill articulation. For students to fully benefit from their learning experiences, making skill articulation a university-wide effort is necessary (Brown, 2015). One final practice co-curricular educators can adopt is initiating conversations and building coalitions with others on campus. Finding partnerships with other offices on initiatives that build student skill articulation can lead to greater experiences for students. Partnering with faculty to bridge curricular and co-curricular learning will allow students to assess their skills in different ways. Creating a large impact can start by inspiring the buy-in of just a few stakeholders. Building skill articulation needs to become a collective effort across our campuses if we hope to eliminate the skills articulation gap currently facing our students, but co-curricular educators can lead the charge by adopting personal practices that address this student need. Only then will we be spared that sinking feeling we get when a student comes into our office with a resume that doesn't do them justice.

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