

Introducing Gail

I met Gail twice at her place of work. Gail is an Aussie and is a teaching only staff member at NZ's largest university. She has over 25 years teaching experience in several universities in Australasia. Gail has a reputation for being a committed and talented teacher. She mentions learning to learning, collaboration, project working, self-management and communication as the employability capabilities she develops through her teaching. Gail applies multiple practices to build these employability capabilities

The 4 Es of Employability

Gail tuned in to the 4Es of employability models soon as I showed it to her. It seemed to be intuitive to her and to offer little that was new.

Enthuse

Gail believes that giving students respect, agency and choice motivates and excites them.

Gail introduces planning and reflection early, inviting students to consider and select projects that prepare them for the future they want. She notes that as they join university many students don't know what they want by way of a profession but they do know who they are and who they want to be. For this reason she provides opportunities for students to work on projects that they find exciting and meaningful.

She says you need to think of students as people; individuals, with their own interests and ambitions. A teachers' job is to make the learning relevant to students. Gail makes ongoing adjustments to her course as she gets to know the members of her class so that what and how they are learning fits in with their own priorities and interests.

Gail believes that teaching involves a collaborative journey and she has to win students' trust for them to accept her as their guide. Gail says you have to let yourself be vulnerable and let the students get to know and trust you as a person, just as in all relationships. Gail believes that her confidence in her students helps build the students' confidence in themselves.

Explore

While her class is beginning a topic Gail is careful not to overload her students: she recognises that learning is time consuming and effortful. She explained that if a new concept is difficult to grasp then she makes sure that the vocabulary used is very easy. On the other hand, if a concept is easy to understand then Gail feels free to introduce more complex and technical language.

Gail teaches languages which involves some necessary surface learning but here too Gail is keen to build students learning as they explore meanings and their application skills in realistic situations. Gail noted that when she learnt a language she had to learn to say things like 'The cat sat on the teapot', she noted that, in her classes, nobody learns language they will never use.

Gail stated that her ultimate ambition is to build a love of learning because if students acquire this then they are equipped for anything. For this reason she devotes a good deal of time to planning learning and helping students get to know how to set themselves up for success and manage themselves when things do not go as planned.

Extend

Gail shapes her courses round projects which provide multiple opportunities to practice language and other skills. She keeps the projects 'real' and asks students to engage with situations they may face out in the workplace. In this way complex skills become ingrained and prepare the students for more advanced work.

Being in Gail's classes is necessarily a social experience; with students working together to plan, undertake and review their learning. However there is also individual reflection and feedback. Much of the reflection and feedback relates to future challenges and applications. In this way students are constantly being prepared for transfer of their learning to other contexts.

Exhibit

Gail finds that traditional models of assessment, such as exams, are ill-suited to the cognitive, linguistic and behavioural skills she tries to develop. In her courses she tries to refocus students away from the formal end-of-course assessment and on to the learning process and their own progress.

Gail's courses often end not in an exam or an essay but with the production of a document or a presentation. Standards are high and the end product is reviewed, worked on and refined over time simulating good practices students should adopt in the workplace.

Opportunities and challenges

I asked Gail how she managed to develop employability capabilities in her courses when other lecturers find it difficult.

Gail believes that her successes can be achieved by anyone. She does not seem to think it's a challenge, suggesting that 'it's about how you think about your role'. To Gail teaching isn't about telling people things it's about building intellectual capability, motivation and independence.

Gail also mentioned that she doesn't mind being different and breaking, or at least bending, a few rules. Possibly her varied work experience has taught her that there isn't just one 'right' way to do things. Throughout her interview she came across as completely focussed on preparing students for their futures. Her passion for teaching and her love of students shone through our conversations.

When I asked Gail about the challenges associated with developing employability capabilities she had to think for a while and then identified student expectations as a barrier. She says after years of directing their efforts towards getting a grade, redirecting them towards becoming more useful or more powerful takes some doing.

Gail also noted that institutional systems and traditional perspectives impose constraints on programme developments.

I suggested to Gail that scaling up some of her practices might be difficult. She said we just need to get clever about it. When I wondered how I could get a class of hundreds to all feel they knew me she pointed out that pop stars do it for millions so why couldn't we – I took her point.

It was a pleasure and an education to talk to Gail.