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Author

JONES, Anna

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Generic attributes as espoused theory: the importance of context

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Abstract

There has been considerable interest in generic attributes in higher education for over a decade and yet while generic skills or attributes are an important aspect of policy, there is often a lack of consistency between beliefs about the importance of these skills and attributes and the degree to which exist in teaching practice. There has been an assumption that these attributes exist outside of the disciplinary context, yet the findings of this study suggest that they are strongly influenced by the disciplinary culture in which they are taught. The study reported in this paper examines the apparent gap between ideal notions of generic attributes and their enactment in teaching practice. This qualitative study examined the teaching of generic attributes in five disciplines (physics, history, economics, medicine and law) in two Australian universities. It found that the notion of generic attributes is highly complex and while attributes such as critical thinking, problem solving and communication are valued by teaching staff they are often implicit in teaching. This gap between what is valued and what is actually taught is a result of variation in interpretation of generic attributes, the difficulties of reducing complex attributes to definable learning outcomes and practical constraints

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on teaching caused by factors such as large classes. Furthermore, it can be explained by the finding that generic attributes are part of the epistemic culture of the disciplines and often remain tacit. The findings of this study have significant implications for scholarship, policy and pedagogy. (HRK / Abstract übernommen) Jones, Anna, annalj@unimelb.edu.au