Shaping the First-Year Experience: Assessment of the Vision Planning Seminar at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business in Japan

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Abstract

Learning assessments of the First-Year Experience (FYE) at universities have drawn increasing attention. Despite its current popularity, few pieces of literature on the FYE learning assessment exist in Japan. To present a case of FYE in the context of Japan, this paper examines the FYE course called the Vision Planning Seminar (VPS) at the Nagoya University of Commerce and Business (NUCB). The university created a unique FYE called the Vision Planning Seminar for Industrial Needs (VPSIN) in an attempt to reduce students' attrition and develop their generic skills, which also serve to develop employability. This case study examines whether VPSIN, as compared to other VPS courses, helps students stay in university, acquire generic skills, and envision their professional futures compared to other VPS courses. Findings show that whereas VPSIN possibly helps improve retention and some generic skills such as presentation skills and communication skills, the program does not seem to help improve other generic skills such as critical thinking and problem solving skills and develop future career perspectives. The author suggests that the VPSIN curriculum be redesigned to more directly focus on helping students with vision planning. It is also recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted in the future to examine how VPSIN has helped students improve specific generic skills.

Keywords: First-year experience, Higher education, Generic skills, Assessment, Employability

1. Introduction

Learning assessments of university students' First-Year Experience (FYE), also called the First-Year Seminar, have drawn increasing attention around the world (Brownlee et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2011; Shrader and Brown, 2008; Willcoxson et al., 2011). According to Clarke and Cundiff (2011, p. 618), FYE is "small discussion courses that focus on teaching basic study skills, academic planning, and time management." As Foster et al. (2012) explain, "[t]he first year at university is very influential in shaping students' engagement throughout the rest of their studies" (p. 33). However, the effectiveness of the FYE programs is difficult to measure. One of the most commonly used measures of FYE effectiveness is student retention and/or attrition. As Levitz et al. (1999) describe, retention and attrition are flip sides of the same coin: while retention refers to continuity of studies into the following year, attrition means discontinuity of studies. As McIntyre et al. (2012, p. 110) state, "a significant percentage [of students] drop out at some point of their first year, making the first year a high risk period when it comes to student retention." Schrader and Brown (2008) report that one in four first-year students at four-year universities in the United States do not return for their second year. While the relationship between the quality of the FYE programs and attrition remains unidentified (Willcoxson, 2011), this study still considers retention rates as a significant variable for assessment.

Another useful indicator to assess FYE is to examine the improvement or degradation in academic performance of students (Arum and Roksa, 2011). Measuring students' academic performance is not an easy task. Grade-Point Average (GPA) is not a reliable indicator as it varies according to institutes, teaching staff, and other factors (Shavelson, 2009). This is compounded as first-year students have no previous records in their university (i.e., their previous GPA reports are from another school). However, several assessment tools, such as Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and Progress Report on Generic Skills (PROG), have emerged to measure generic skills (Ito, 2014a).

In the context of examining the FYE program called the Vision Planning Seminar (VPS) at the Nagoya University of Commerce and Business (NUCB) in Japan, as the title of the course indicates, whether the course helps students envision their future career outlooks is a critical means of measuring its effectiveness. NUCB is one of the 23 universities selected for the national project "Improving Higher Education for Industrial Needs" funded by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (Ito, 2014b). In connection with the project, NUCB created a unique first-year seminar called the Vision Planning Seminar for Industrial Needs (VPSIN). In 2013, seven out of the 30 VPS courses were selected as VPSIN courses. Other VPS courses were composed of communication VPS (CVPS) and general VPS (i.e., without a specific target skill). Students were randomly selected by the Department of School Affairs to participate in VPSIN; they did not enroll on a voluntary basis. Each VPSIN course was limited to 10-15 students. This seminar, apart from an attempt to improve retention, provides unique opportunities for the first-year students to acquire generic skills such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and writing skills that serve to develop employability skills as well as to encourage students to envision their future prospects. This study analyzes to what extent VPSIN has achieved these objectives.

This paper first briefly reviews the history of FYE in the United States, where it arguably originated, and then its history in Japan. Then, it looks into how VPSIN is structured to achieve its objectives. This paper next compares VPSIN with other VPS courses in regard to retention rates, generic skills, and vision planning. The Progress Report on Generic Skills (PROG), an assessment tool to measure generic skills, and open-ended surveys and interviews with VPSIN students were employed to examine the VPSIN course.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical overview of FYE

The concept of the FYE program was introduced in the United States in the 19th century (Yano, 2007). By the end of 1930s, approximately 90% of all US universities had subjects similar to FYE (Yano, 2007). The FYE concept was developed further as *University 101* by John N. Gardner at University of South Carolina in the 1970s (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989). FYE then "gained momentum in the 1980s, flourished in the 1990s, and continues today" (Hunter 2006, p.8). At present, approximately 95% of the US four-year institutions have FYE-related programs (Jamelske, 2009).

In Japan, FYE started garnering attention in the 2000s while some universities such as Kanazawa Institute of Technology and Akita University, had already introduced it in the mid-1990s. The Japan Association of the First-Year Experience at Universities and Colleges was founded in 2008 and the First Japanese Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience took place in the same year. Currently, almost all universities provide courses on FYE in Japan (Yamada, 2013).

At NUCB, FYE was originally introduced as the "Basic Seminar" in 2002. The purpose of this seminar was to prepare first-year students for university life and to prevent dropping out because first-year students are at the highest risk of dropping out (Foster et al., 2012; Levitz et al., 1999; McIntyre et al., 2012; Schrader and Brown, 2008). One of the reasons for dropping out is that "some students cannot cope with the change which occurs between their prior experience and that in year one" (Cook, 2012, p. 20). FYE thus intends to help students deal with this issue. When the Basic Seminar was introduced, it took place only in the first semester of the first year.

In 2006, the Basic Seminar was renamed the Vision Planning Seminar (VPS) as many students did not have clear visions and goals about their futures and did not know what they should do at university or beyond. Harada (as cited in Kawaijuku, 2010, p. 186), the professor who created VPS, defined it as "a seminar that enables students to envision their futures and think of what to do to achieve their goals." He also mentioned that planning visions and setting goals serve to improve retention because students without any purpose tended to drop out. As with the Basic Seminar, VPS was offered only in the first semester of the first year. Since 2009, it has occurred over the entirety of the first year. The course focused on teaching and testing the content of the Synthetic Personality Inventory (SPI) during the second semesters between 2009 and 2011. SPI is a test that companies often use to examine the ability and personality of perspective employees. The test was invented and administered by Recruit, a major Japanese human resources company. However, there was a critique of teaching to the SPI test by NUCB faculty members. They believed that what was needed for first-year students was to acquire generic skills that serve to develop employability rather than skills to score high on the SPI test.

2.2 Redefining VPS

2.2.1 Retention/Attrition

As with other first-year seminars around the world, one of the main purposes of VPS is to improve retention as most attrition occurs during the first year of university (Barefoot, 2000; Stratton et al., 2005). According to Clark and Cundiff (2011), there are academic and social reasons for attrition. While courses that intend to improve student academic performance provide support in teaching specific skills (e.g., writing) to promote academic integration, courses that stress student social involvement "develop and maintain social relationships with peers and faculty" (p. 618).

2.2.2 Generic Skills

As shown in the Figure 1, VPS is also expected to help students acquire generic skills such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and writing.

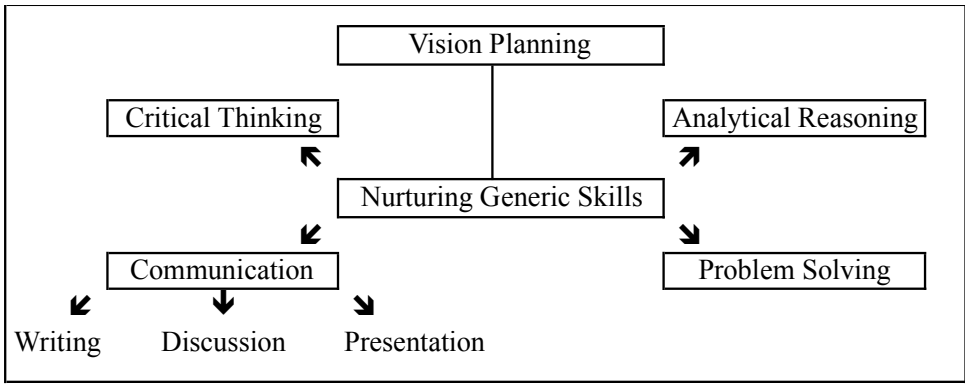

Figure 1. Purpose of VPS: Vision Planning and Generic Skills

* The figure is constructed based on skills measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment (Council for Aid to Education, 2013)

These generic skills are measured through a test called the Progress Report on Generic Skills (PROG), which has emerged in Japan as a popular assessment tool of university students' generic skills (Ito, 2014a). PROG intends to measure two generic skills elements: *literacy* and *competency*. In PROG, *literacy* is described as intellectual competence and *competency* is described as communication competence (Riasec, 2012). The usage of the terms *literacy* and *competency* may be misleading. As Matsushita (2010) explains, the elements of literacy and competency can overlap. According to the Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), literacy is defined as "the capacity of students to analyze, reason, and communicate effectively" (OECD, 2005, p. 3) and is one of key competencies. Following these definitions, literacy is part of competency and vice versa. Despite weaknesses in the terminology, this paper follows PROG's usage of the terms *literacy* and *competency* but uses them in *italics* to differentiate them from OECD's use.

Generic skills acquired in VPS are expected to feed into and support students' capabilities in seminars in the second to fourth years and eventually assist in writing the bachelor's thesis. NUCB has set eight learning goals (LGs) to be achieved before graduation. LGs have been elaborated on by the Committee for Assurance of Learning at NUCB and are assessed through the following criteria:

1. Establishing a concrete, important, and feasible research theme
2. Acquiring academic knowledge and applying it to solve problems
3. Arguing convincing conclusions through proper processes
4. Expressing arguments through organized structure in writing
5. Creating and performing presentations
6. Communicating messages clearly and effectively
7. Utilizing information technology
8. Thinking and acting globally

Students are expected to demonstrate the first four of these eight skills in their bachelor's thesis and the last four in their second to fourth year seminars. These more specific skills overlap with generic skills as well. For instance, establishing a research topic and applying knowledge entail critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and writing skills. After all, generic skills contribute to basic research skills in many respects.

2.2.3 Vision Planning

As the name indicates, VPS is a career planning course. The term vision was originally borrowed from strategic management tactics in business where it indicates a desired future for an organization in the next three to ten years (Kaplan and Norton, 2008). This principle can be applied to individuals: what students should do in the next three to ten years to achieve their objectives. According to Osborn et al. (2007), career planning courses in general have positive impacts on students such as career decidedness, vocational identity, and higher graduation rates. In this regard, VPS helps students decide what they want to do through self-analyses (including their Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats: SWOT) and find vocational options regarding future employement through interactions with their senior cohorts (e.g., those who have studied abroad or secured their future professions) as well as professionals (e.g., personnel from Toyota City Hall and Japan Tourist Bureau: JTB). With regard to higher graduation rates, as Harada (as cited in Kawaijuku, 2010, p. 186) explains, vision planning and goal setting serve to improve retention. VPSIN was created to reinforce these three aspects: retention, generic skills, and future career prospects.

2.4 VPS for Industrial Needs (VPSIN)

Although VPSIN started in April 2013, the course content was not significantly different from other VPS in its first semester, which ended in July 2013. In the second semester, VPSIN differentiated drastically from other VPS courses. In order for first-year students to acquire these generic skills, VPSIN allows for substantial amounts of time for group discussions, presentations, and writing reports. As part of VPSIN, students also visit the Ecoful Town in Toyota City, a pavilion dedicated to demonstrating how Toyota City elaborates on strategies to tackle environmental challenges toward achieving a low-carbon society (Ito, 2014c) in part because extra-curricular activities play important roles in developing generic and employability skills (Andrews and Russell, 2012). Interactions with the personnel from Toyota City Hall and JTB are another feature of VPSIN.

2.5 Organization of the VPSIN course

In the first session of the second semester, students were provided with an overview of the course, given the materials, and divided into groups according to each core theme in the course (i.e., transportation, forestry, industry, urban centers, and public welfare and livelihood). In the second session, Toyota City Hall personnel presented about its eco-policies and Ecoful Town. After the lecture, students discussed and prepared questions relevant to their team's theme. Each team was given a separate theme. The personnel from Toyota City Hall answered questions from each team. In the third session, students reviewed the purpose of and prepared for their visit to Ecoful Town. On the Saturday after the third session, they visited Ecoful Town and were shown around by the employees from Toyota City Hall. In the fourth session, based on their experiences at Ecoful Town, each student wrote a report and students prepared group presentations related to their themes. The purpose of group research and presentations was to gather informational content that would help develop the final promotional presentations on Ecoful Town and/or Toyota City. In the fifth session, students delivered the group presentations. They were given feedback about the presentation (e.g., content, organization) from their classmates, teaching assistants, and staff. In the sixth session, based on the feedback, they revised their presentations.

In the seventh session, personnel from JTB lectured the students. JTB has advertising expertise and provided professional advice on how students might present their findings or experiences regarding each theme from Ecoful Town. For instance, the transportation team learned how the Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) functions, while the public welfare and livelihood team examined the Smart House (see Ito, 2014c for details). JTB personnel also discussed their expertise and experiences in career path development in order for students to learn to plan their future professional prospects. Based on the advice given by JTB personnel, in the eighth session, students worked on improving their group presentations in regard to organization, content, and visual aids. Some made brochures or sample magazine pages for the promotion of a particular theme at Ecoful Town or Toyota City. In the ninth session, they performed their revamped group presentations and were given feedback by personnel from JTB and Toyota City Hall. In the tenth session, personnel from JTB again lectured the students to further develop their work, covering topics such as marketing concepts (e.g., Attention, Interest, Desire, Memory, and Action: AIDMA; Attention, Interest, Search, Action, and Share: AISAS). In the eleventh session, students prepared their final presentations. In the twelfth session, students took the PROG test for a second time. The test occurred at this time because it needed to take place

during the semester while still allowing the maximum possible time between the first and the second tests. On the Wednesday after the twelfth session, they conducted group presentations in an internal conference attended by teaching staff, students and personnel from JTB and Toyota City Hall personnel. As Sambell et al., (2013, p. 26) explains, "[m]aking a good presentation, especially in front of other students and local employers as well as instructors, challenges students to do their best rather than just meeting the assessment requirements."

While feedback from Toyota City Hall and JTB personnel for the presentations in the fifth and ninth sessions served as a formative assessment for students' further learning, the final conference served as a summative assessment for student evaluation (see Ito, 2014d, for an explanation of formative and summative assessments). Personnel from JTB and Toyota City Hall made comments on the students' final work that students' presentation skills had drastically improved as they had translated previous feedback into practice. In the thirteenth session, students worked on their vision statements and wrote a report about their visions in part based on what they had learned from VPSIN. In the fourteenth session, each student performed a presentation on his/her vision planning.

3. Methodology

This case study examines whether and to what extent VPSIN has achieved its main objectives: improving retention, developing generic skills, and elaborating on future professional prospects through: 1) retention rates, 2) PROG test improvement, and 3) qualitative surveys and interviews with students. This research first examines the difference in retention rates between students who have taken VPSIN and those who have taken other VPS courses. While the relationship between the quality of FYE programs and attrition remains unidentified (Willcoxson et al., 2011) due to various external factors such as non-VPS course influences and personal issues (Daugherty and Lane, 1999), this research still considers retention rates as a variable for assessing the effectiveness of the VPS program in order to confirm that VPSIN at least does not increase attrition compared to other VPS courses. Since the Department of School Affairs defines that students who miss over 30% of their classes are unable to receive course credits, attrition in this research is defined as a less than 70% of attendance rates.

With PROG, an assessment tool to test generic skills quantitatively, and the subsequent use of a paired sample t-test, this study analyzes how much VPSIN helped students improve generic skills in comparison with other VPS courses. Out of 166 VPS students who took the first PROG in April and May 2013, at the very beginning of their first semester, 69 VPSIN and 62 CVPS students took the second PROG in December 2013 and January 2014, the end of their second semester. That is, the time span between the pre- and post-test was approximately eight to nine months and 69 VPSIN students and 62 CVPS students took PROG twice. This case study examines whether a difference exists in learning (i.e., PROG scores) and how much difference exists between VPSIN students and other VPS students. The main criteria compared is not the final PROG scores but the level of improvement from the first test to the second. Open-ended surveys and interviews of 44 VPSIN students were conducted allowing students to elaborate on how they felt the seminar was developing their skills. During the interviews, students were asked several questions such as what skills they thougth they had acquired through VPSIN and whether they felt that the VPSIN experiences, such as their visit to Ecoful Town and interactions with personnel from Toyota City Hall and JTB, helped them shape their future career plans.

Limitations

Several limitations exist in this study. First of all, the reliability/validity of the PROG test has not been thoroughly examined (see Ito, 2014a). Second, while the purpose of this study is to measure the impact of the VPSIN program, the program took place over only three months from September to December. The duration is arguably too short for fully managing and analyzing the long-term effects of an educational program. Third, generic skills are acquired not only through formal education but other sources as well. VPSIN is after all just one course per week and its impact on improving generic skills, if any, is limited (Campbell, 2010). However, examining VPSIN at this point is important as it may provide opportunities to identify issues to be addressed in order to further improve the program and/or to conduct future assessment research.

4. Results

4.1 Retention Rates

In 2013, 698 NUCB students took VPS. Among them, 77 took VPSIN and 621, including 62 CVPS students, took other VPS courses. While 7.79% of VPSIN students had less than a 70% of attendance rate, 10.95% of other VPS students had less than a 70% of attendance rate. VPSIN outweighed other VPS courses in retention rates by 3.16%. Although we cannot conclude that VPSIN has had a significant impact on student retention, it is safe to state that VPSIN, at least, has not increase attrition in comparison with other VPS courses. One of the most feasible

explanations for this result is the small size of VPSIN. Each VPSIN class size is limited to fewer than 15 students and thus instructors and teaching assistants arguably attend to their students better than more croweded VPS courses.

4.2 PROG

Table 2. PROG Results

	No.	L (1)	SD	L (2)	SD	C (1)	SD	C (2)	SD
VPSIN	69	2.91	1.43	2.83	1.70	2.91	1.47	2.91	1.50
CVPS	62	2.69	1.26	2.69	1.48	3.05	1.36	3.08	1.61

* No.=Number of students; L=*Literacy*; C=*Competency*; (1)=the first PROG; (2)=the second PROG

The average *literacy* and *competency* scores of VPSIN students in the first PROG test were both 2.91/7.00 with standard deviations of 1.43 and 1.47 respectively while those of CVPS students were 2.69 (SD=1.26) for *literacy* and 3.05 (SD=1.36) for *competency*. Overall, VPSIN scored relatively higher in *literacy* while CVPS scored higher in *competency*. In the second PROG test, the average score of *literacy* of VPSIN deteriorated from 2.91 to 2.83 while the average *competency* score of VPSIN remained the same at 2.91. The average *literacy* score of CVPS remained the same at 2.69 (SD=1.48) and the average *competency* score improved from 3.05 to 3.08 (SD=1.61).

In order to examine whether the above-stated differences in *literacy* and *competency* scores between the first and the second PROG tests are statistically significant, a paired sample t-test for means was conducted. The result is described in Table 3.

Table 3. T-test: Paired Two Sample for Means

	VPSIN/Literacy	VPSIN/Competency	CVPS/Literacy	CVPS/Competency
T-Stat	0.50434521	0	0	-0.1964882
P (T<=t) one-tail	0.30782459	0.5	0.5	0.42244063
T Critical one-tail	1.66757228	1.66757228	1.66757228	1.67021948
P (T<=t) two-tail	0.61564917	1	1	0.84488127
T-Critical two-tail	1.99546891	1.99546891	1.99546891	1.99962357

Given that all t-stats fall below t-critical values, it is likely that none of the above-stated differences in the first and the second PROG tests were statistically significant. That is, from a statistical perspective, there is no point of arguing the differences in *literacy* and *competency* scores between the first and the second PROG scores. Then how can we interpret this result? There are a few leading possibilities.

First, some students exerted different levels of effort in the first and the second PROG tests. It is possible that students made less effort on the second PROG than the first as they became aware that PROG scores would not affect their grades or students may have simply been more motivated at the beginning of their university career than eight or nine months later. Second, VPSIN activities may nurture generic skills that PROG does not appear to measure such as writing and presentation skills. During the course, students were given at least two writing assignments: one report about their visit to Ecoful Town and another assignment about their vision planning. Although VPSIN intended to develop students' critical thinking and problem solving skills that PROG appears to measure though discussions and case studies, the time allocated for these activities was limited due to extracurricular activities, notably lectures by the personnel from Toyota City Hall and JTB.

Regarding the first possibility, it may be worth conducting research such as surveys or interviews with students whose PROG scores deteriorated a lot (e.g., by two points, given the SD range of the PROG scores=1.26-1.70) and ask them why they scored worse on the second PROG, though the validity of this study might still remain in question as students can tell a lie or simply cannot identify reasons. Concerning the second possibility, while improving skills such as presentation, discussion, and writing skills, on which VPSIN focuses, PROG may not be able to measure them. Future VPSIN courses should either develop skills that PROG measures or use other assessment tools to measure skills on which VPSIN focuses. The following section, though open-ended surveys and interviews, explores what kinds of skills students feel they have acquired through VPSIN.

4.3 Surveys and Interviews

During the open-ended surveys and interviews, 44 VPSIN students were asked whether they felt that VPSIN successfully developed any generic skills or helped them envision their futures. In response to the question, 89.2%

answered affirmatively: 34.1% mentioned that VPSIN played an important role in interacting with classmates and/or making friends and improving their communication skills. Also, 29.6% said that VPSIN was useful for helping them to learn how to prepare and perform presentations.

One student commented, "What I learned in VPSIN is the significance of communication skills: abilities to organize my opinions and thoughts and to make myself understood. We were given a lot of opportunities to perform presentations, which I considered training to explain myself explicitly and impressively in public. We were also taught to pose as many questions as possible. This helped us develop our communication skills. I was able to learn communication skills through performing presentations and asking questions in the course."

Regarding the visit to Ecoful Town, 77.3% of VPSIN students found it meaningful. One student stated, "It was a precious experience that we made our suggestions about Ecoful Town to personnel from Toyota City Hall. I was happy that he praised our presentations."

Many also found interactions with personnel from JTB and Toyota City Hall useful. One student expressed, "I believe that I acquired skills to summarize by listening to personnel from Toyota City Hall and JTB, writing the content in reports, and presenting it in front of them for feedback." Another student described, "From the personnel from Toyota City Hall and JTB, I learned how to draw attention from the audience strategically during the presentation."

However, few students reported that VPSIN helped them envision their future professional outlooks. While one student remarked that learning from JTB made him want to work for an advertisement agency, another claimed, "I did not come up with anything that I learned from VPSIN for elaborating on my future."

5. Discussion

This study indicates that although VPSIN seems to have helped students stay in university and improve some generics skills such as communication and presentation skills, it did not seem to be successful in improving other generic skills such as critical thinking and analytical reasoning. Indeed, VPSIN students' PROG *literacy* scores did not show a sign of improvement. While it is possible to argue that VPSIN may nurture generic skills unmeasured by PROG (e.g., writing skills), VPSIN then needs to demonstrate how these skills are developed throughout the course. In relation to this issue of measuring specific generic skills, the open-ended survey and interview questions used for this study to evaluate VPSIN may need to be revised as well to examine whether and to what extent the course helps students improve specific generic skills.

With regard to vision planning, VPSIN did not seem to have visible impacts on helping students envision their future career perspectives. The 2013 VPSIN focused on hands-on experiences as well as writing and presentations but may not have spent sufficient time on encouraging students to elaborate on envisioning their futures. Overall, VPSIN was successful in some respects but was found to lack enough time to fully achieve some of its objectives such as developing some generic skills and in particular envisioning future career outlooks. The VPSIN curriculum needs to be redesigned to focus on vision planning in the future.

In doing so, while keeping the positive aspects of VPSIN such as the focus in improving writing and presentation skills, the future VPS will require some changes in course content, pedagogical approach, and learning assessment. In the course content, especially regarding career development planning, activities such as interviews with working professionals or senior students who have already received official offers of employment from companies should be implemented. This way, students could learn how to envision their career path, or at least, could see examples of how one has done it.

Also, the future VPS and other courses should employ more active learning approaches. While the detailed explanation and examples of implementing active learning approaches are presented elsewhere (Ito, 2014d), to put it simply, active learning is student-centered learning by doing based on hands-on experience (Greene, 2011) in order to engage students in learning (Smart et al., 2012). As Prince (2004) states, collaborative learning and problem-based learning (PBL) are prime examples of active learning approaches.

With regard to learning assessments, whether using PROG or other matrics for measurement, it is essential to conduct a longitudinal study that shows the extent of student learning, given that the time span between the first and the second PROG tests was only eight or nine months in this study, which may be too short to assess student performance improvement. As Arum and Roksa (2011) did with CLA in the US context, at least a two-year time span will be required for this kind of research that measures the improvement of student learning.

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