LEEP: Opportunities for Students to Develop and Practice Key Skills

What’s the lingo for LEEP?

How students talk about collaboration, adaptability, responsibility, creativity, and implementation

The LEEP Lab (alphabetical):
Jacob Feinberg ’15
Yuka Sato ’14
Rebecca Stacey ’14
Briania Valois ’15
Olivia Vande Griek ’15
Victoria Westerband ’14
(sponsor: Professor Seana Moran)

LEEP Clark University launched LEEP (Liberal Education & Effective Practice) to combine a traditional liberal arts education with intensive experiences to develop skills needed for today’s complex and changing world. Thus, in addition to knowledge and academic skills, Clark students should develop and practice collaboration, adaptive expertise, integration, responsibility, creativity, and implementing an idea or plan in the real world. Considerable research has addressed all six key skill areas. Yet, much of this work is theoretical and mired in jargon that makes it inaccessible to students. For example, it is unlikely that a student would naturally say or write, “I demonstrated my adaptive expertise by...” How do students describe their experiences of creativity, or responsibility, or collaboration, or the other key skills?

LEEP is posited as building upon many of Clark’s existing strengths in providing opportunities for students to engage communities, challenge conventions, and pursue their life purposes. Thus, some students said they already had LEAP skills. Our study examined whether all existing student blogs publicly available on the Clark website to explore how students talk about these skills. Three categories of blogs were included: seven LEEP Pioneers comprising 43 blog entries, seven Study Abroad bloggers comprising 74 entries, and 10 Clark Diaries bloggers comprising 207 entries (N=324 entries). These blogs were very busy, as many were not instructed to write explicitly about LEAP skills; even the LEEP Pioneers, who were oriented to LEEP, could write about anything. This study, therefore, examines student statements without prompting or anchoring to LEEP—how did these skills “naturally” come up? In what situations did these skills arise, and how did students articulate them?

We devised a checklist of definitions and key words for each key skill, initially from scholarly literature then expanded based on dictionaries and thesauri. While extracting blog statements that address these key skills, we remained open to other phrases for which context suggested the key skill was present, and we revised the codebook accordingly. Among relevant statements, we looked for patterns in how the key skills were described, patterns in phrasing within and across the three types of blogs, and patterns of situational context and linguistic context. Some key skills were discussed more than others: instances of implementation, responsibility, and creativity were more common than others, according to the blogs. The purpose of this poster is to provide some preliminary findings regarding how students articulate LEAP-related skills.

Adaptive Expertise

Adaptive expertise is the ability to apply knowledge from one situation to another unrelated situation. It involves two features: expertise from a past situation, and recognition of a need to adapt to the current situation. The particular situation plays a big role in which feature is emphasized. Students frequently talked about adaptation in their study abroad experiences: “It's different when you're on the other side of the world.” Whereas, students talked more about learning new skills and eventually becoming “experts” by the end of an internship: “It's been surprisingly rewarding taking photo after photo, noticing the differences between the photos.” These combined statements tend to be generic rather than specific, but indicate a sense of value—albeit with uncertainty—of the recent experience.

Collaboration

Collaboration involves a joint effort among individuals to achieve a common goal. In business, collaboration is often associated with a task completion process. For students, however, collaboration primarily meant a group learning process. Whether they were at Clark, an internship, or abroad, they were surrounded by the notion that they were at Clark, an internship, or abroad, they were surrounded by the notion that they were students should already exhibit LEAP skills. Our qualitative study used existing student blogs publicly available on the Clark website to explore how students talk about these skills. Three categories of blogs were included: seven LEEP Pioneers comprising 43 blog entries, seven Study Abroad bloggers comprising 74 entries, and 10 Clark Diaries bloggers comprising 207 entries (N=324 entries). These blogs were very busy, as many were not instructed to write explicitly about LEAP skills; even the LEEP Pioneers, who were oriented to LEEP, could write about anything. The particular situation plays a big role in which feature is emphasized. Students frequently talked about adaptation in their study abroad experiences: “It's different when you're on the other side of the world.” Whereas, students talked more about learning new skills and eventually becoming “experts” by the end of an internship: “It's been surprisingly rewarding taking photo after photo, noticing the differences between the photos.” These combined statements tend to be generic rather than specific, but indicate a sense of value—albeit with uncertainty—of the recent experience.

Integration

Integration is similar to adaptive expertise, but knowledge from different past situations or domains are synthesized to create a new understanding that doesn’t fall within either of the original domains. Students discuss integration as incorporating knowledge, skills, and/or experiences from academic, professional, cultural, and personal areas to become a new whole understanding. Students’ language indicates unification, knowledge creation, adversity, and/or transformation. They talk about “connections,” “overlap,” “challenges,” and “evolving.” The linguistic context surrounding these key words is important. Integration tends to be indirectly suggested rather than explicitly discussed. Similarly, the situational context of the blog matters: students integrate academic and professional perspectives in the LEEP Pioneers blogs, whereas Study Abroad bloggers integrate personal and cultural perspectives, and Clark Diaries bloggers integrate personal and academic perspectives over a longer time period.

Implementation

Implementation involves the process whereby students see an opportunity, motivate themselves when facing challenges, prioritize tasks, and make decisions to achieve their plans and goals. Students described implementation using words such as “strategy,” “priority,” “persevere,” “motivated,” and “focused.” For instance, one student took an opportunity to proactively send a professor an email “while I was deciding where I wanted to transfer to, and told him I was interested in his work.” Another student described facing challenges “as a challenge” as college is, “a busy as ballroom and school work makes me, how many papers and essays and socializations and meals I need to cram into the day.” One student prioritized by realizing “the amount of work you have, the amount of time available to you, and the amount of time you need to spend.” The student described this is a balance of what’s more important, and “think in a new way, do something they have never done before, or make something, creativity is being put to use. Commonly used words to express creativity included: “new,” “different,” “realize,” “making,” and “idea.”

The LEEP Lab (alphabetical):
Jacob Feinberg ’15
Yuka Sato ’14
Rebecca Stacey ’14
Briania Valois ’15
Olivia Vande Griek ’15
Victoria Westerband ’14
(sponsor: Professor Seana Moran)