



What hinders teachers from translating their beliefs into teaching behaviors: The case of teaching generic skills in Vietnamese universities



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers believe that teaching generic skills (GS) is a key mission of the university.
- Teachers believe that GS improve students' learning and employment outcomes.
- Teacher beliefs correlates with their GS-teaching behaviors.
- Their GS-teaching behaviors seem to relate with self-motivation more than with expertise.
- Leadership-related factors affect their GS-teaching behaviors a great deal.

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ABSTRACT

This article re-visits the relationship between teacher beliefs and teaching behaviours and analyses factors influencing the translation of teacher beliefs into teaching behaviours using the case of developing generic skills for university students. Through interviews with 16 teachers of skills subjects and 25 teachers of specialised subjects of the Business Administration programs in six different Vietnamese universities, it was shown that there was an indirect relationship between teacher beliefs and their teaching behaviours. The analysis showed that institutional leadership and teachers' personal motivation could strongly influence the translation of their beliefs into actual teaching behaviours.

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1. Introduction

Teacher beliefs and their teaching behaviours have long been a topic for investigation by many educational researchers. Recent studies have found mixed results regarding the relationship between their beliefs and behaviours. While some studies determined that they are correlated; some found they are not; others discovered that the relationship is not direct, but is influenced by personal and contextual factors (for example, [de la Harpe & David, 2012](#); [Ertmer, Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Sadik, Sendurur, & Sendurur, 2012](#); [Jones, 2009](#); [Kim, Kim, Lee, Spector, & DeMeester, 2013](#); [Sak, Şahin Sak, & Yerlikaya, 2015](#)). Most studies in this area have used

quantitative methods, which are statistically sound, but may reduce opportunities to depict the complexity of factors that affect the teacher belief-teaching behaviours relationship. Similarly, only few studies in this area have investigated the teacher beliefs-teaching behaviours relationship with a focus on teaching a particular topic, which could help deepen our understanding about the relationship within a specific context of teaching. Therefore, it is important that this relationship be explored further using qualitative methods with a focus on teaching a particular subject or certain type of skill.

The case of teaching generic skills (GS) will provide an opportunity to examine the existing teacher belief-teaching behaviours relationship, in addition to factors that influence the translation of teacher beliefs into teaching behaviours. GS are

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non-discipline specific skills that can be found across disciplines and are transferrable between study, work, and personal life contexts (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2013). Some examples of GS are communication, presentation, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, among others. GS have been found to enhance students' employability skills, help them learn autonomously throughout life, enable them to cope with an unknown future and empower them to act for the social good (Hager & Holland, 2006). Therefore, teaching GS has recently become a central focus in many curricula in higher education (HE). The problem is teachers do not seem to engage with teaching these skills. Some studies, mostly conducted in the context of Western universities, have found that teachers' personal beliefs regarding the relevance of teaching GS in HE could influence their teaching of these skills (de la Harpe & David, 2012; de la Harpe, David, Dalton, Thomas, & Girardi, 2009). Others argued that their beliefs and teaching behaviours could be improved if institutional leadership is used effectively (Barrie, Hughes, Smith, & Thomson, 2009; de la Harpe & David, 2012). In Vietnam, a policy about teaching GS to students was issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and has been implemented in Vietnamese universities; however, the policy appears not to have been translated into practice at the subject level. As such, it can serve as a unique context to investigate the relationship between teacher beliefs and teaching behaviours relationship as well as allow for the analysis of factors that influence this relationship.

The study reported in this article is distinctive in two ways. Firstly, it addresses the literature gap regarding the teacher beliefs-teaching behaviours relationship and factors influencing the relationship by using the qualitative method with a focus on teaching a certain set of skills. Secondly, it adds value to existing literature about GS teaching by using data from non-Western university contexts. We must understand teacher beliefs regarding the relevance or irrelevance of teaching GS, and factors affecting their teaching of these skills in order to help them engage with this task so that implementation goals will be achieved. The article will present implications for both teacher professional development and will suggest ways to move forward with GS implementation in HE.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher beliefs and behaviours

In this study, the term 'beliefs' is defined as teachers' awareness of and confidence in the importance of teaching GS to students. In education, both 'beliefs' and 'conceptions' have been adopted as the working concept for many studies. The term 'beliefs' is adopted for this study because it depicts a dispositional state of mind that persists through time but unnecessarily manifests itself either in consciousness or in behaviour (Armstrong, 2001). Meanwhile, teacher beliefs are sometimes referred to as teacher conceptions, which are 'activated and potentially altered by the specific context' (Entwistle, Skinner, Entwistle, & Orr, 2000). As such, a study about teacher beliefs would better explore the implicit, consistent view of teachers about a phenomenon.

Teacher beliefs are shaped by their sociocultural backgrounds, professional expertise, life experiences, and working environments (Assen, Meijers, Otting, & Poell, 2016; Ertmer et al., 2012; Mihaela & Alina-Oana, 2015; Tiwari, Das, & Sharma, 2015; Wang & Du, 2016). Therefore, their beliefs are not fixed but can adapt or change with new situations they experience (Ertmer et al., 2012; Mihaela & Alina-Oana, 2015; Wang & Du, 2016). However, research evidence has also shown that teacher beliefs that relate to essential socio-

cultural aspects are not easily altered (Tiwari et al., 2015; Wu, Palmer, & Field, 2011).

Several studies have been conducted to explore the relationship between teacher beliefs and their teaching behaviours (for example, de la Harpe & David, 2012; Ertmer et al., 2012; Jones, 2009; Kim et al., 2013; Sak et al., 2015). For example, Kim et al. (2013) investigated the relationship between (i) teacher beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning, (ii) beliefs about effective ways of teaching, and (iii) their use of technology in teaching. The researchers found a significant positive correlation between the three variables. Similarly, Ertmer et al. (2012) found a positive correlation between teacher pedagogical beliefs and their classroom technology practices. They discovered that internal factors such as a passion for technology or a problem-solving mentality, and support from others, such as administrators or personal learning networks, significantly influenced teacher behaviours regarding technology use in the classroom. They also identified that existing attitudes and beliefs toward technology, as well as teachers' knowledge and skill levels were the major obstacles preventing them from utilising technology-assisted teaching practices. However, Assen et al. (2016) found that teachers' beliefs regarding a learner-oriented approach to teaching did not necessarily transform into concrete teaching behaviours. They ascribed teacher behaviours to the curriculum design, teachers' confidence in students' self-directed capabilities, and teachers' confidence in their own facilitation skills.

As such, the review of existing literature suggests that although teacher beliefs can influence their pedagogical practice, their teaching behaviours may not be consistent with their beliefs. At the same time, research suggests that there are factors that may affect the translation of teacher beliefs to concrete teaching behaviours. These factors may differ across educational contexts and vary between teachers, dependent on their own personal experiences in life, educational, and work environments. Therefore, the relationship between teacher beliefs and their teaching behaviours need to be explored further, along with factors that may influence the translation of beliefs into concrete teaching behaviours.

2.2. Teaching generic skills in higher education: prospects and challenges

In recent decades, HE institutions around the world have been developing GS (also known as 'transferable skills', 'employability skills', 'essential skills', or 'generic graduate attributes') (Bowman, 2010), for their students in response to a variety of factors that have been exposed in the HE sector. In terms of culture, HE sectors have shifted from elite, to mass, to universal education (Hayhoe, Li, Lin, & Zha, 2012; Trow & Burrage, 2010). With more full fee-paying students on campus, the notion of students as customers in HE has been given more attention (Star & Hammer, 2008). Thus, HE institutions must pay closer attention to students' learning needs and, in addition, must be fully or partially responsible for their students' employability. In terms of socio-economic impact, due to an increase in governmental funding cuts, HE institutions are reaching out to local communities and industries for research and educational collaboration (Etzkowitz, 2008; Inman & Schütze, 2010). As such, HE institutions have become aware of training students in skills that meet employers' demands (Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Jackson, 2010). Politically, the increased importance of university rankings (Rauhvargers, 2011), HE learning outcomes assessment (Coates & Richardson, 2012; Marginson, 2009), and linking GS implementation to quality assurance and funding schemes (for example, in the case of Australia see Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2014) have compelled HE institutions to develop GS for students as a compulsory activity.

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