Higher Education Academy

TRANSFORMING TEACHING
INSPIRING LEARNING

Innovative pedagogies series:

Enabling all learners to SOAR for employability

An inclusive, integrative pedagogy

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Contents

Introduction

What should 'employability development' look and feel like for students who will graduate into the competitive, globally connected and technological world of today? How can staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) deal with the new, multiple and complex challenges they face, and meet the needs of their diverse stakeholders? Governments around the world are concerned about their education systems competing to unlock the potential of their people. Employers want graduates with the values, work ethic, talent, and experience that will fit the needs of their organisations. Graduate recruitment surveys typically reveal that personal and inter-personal attributes are vitally important but often lacking in graduate applicants. Students have access to a wealth of information on the internet, but need to acquire information literacy and other higher-order skills. Parents want a return on the investment they are making in their children's education.

Over recent years many good initiatives in the UK higher education (HE) sector are aiming to develop employability in one way or another – for example personal development planning (PDP) and the Progress File (QAA 2001b, 2008), work-related and inter-professional learning, careers education and guidance, skills certificates, e-portfolios, alumni or employer mentoring. While the good intentions and values of such initiatives cannot be denied, qualitative evidence and statistics (for example, from HESA annual surveys) show that many students still graduate with ill-defined professional abilities and aspirations, and/or an inability to implement their choices. We may not be able to do much about an economic system that fails to absorb all graduates into appropriate employment, but we educators can work in supportive partnerships to develop the attributes that enable everyone to be(come) more effective and productive in careers of lifelong learning.

SOAR for Employability is an inclusive and integrative pedagogy that feasibly lifts the diverse employability initiatives mentioned above from an administrative and piecemeal strategy and brings them together as a coherent and uniquely personal, educational process engaging the minds and hearts of all students, regardless of their subject and level of study. In this report, *SOAR for Employability* refers to the sub-title of the book (*SOARing to Success,* Kumar 2007) I authored as my National Teaching Fellowship (NTF) project. The SOAR model (as it has since come to be known) animates the recursive inter-relationships between Self, Opportunity, Aspirations and Results (SOAR). In a nutshell, SOAR is an inter-disciplinary, learner-centred process of holistic, humanistic, personalised development.

The book provides the concepts, practical tools and techniques that staff can adopt or adapt to suit different students, subjects and levels of study, indicating how they can be implemented within curricula. SOAR has time and again motivated diverse learners to be pro-active and self-managed participants in experiences and opportunities that build transferable skills and employability attributes, without sacrificing good learning in their main disciplinary field.

Since this pedagogy has been evaluated with several different cohorts of students in different contexts, and is well documented in my previous publications (Kumar 2007; 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2013), I will here summarise, review and analyse SOAR: What still makes it innovative, relevant and important within HE? How may it be implemented as an enhancement in your curriculum?

Distinctive objectives of SOAR for Employability

The main aim of developing, publishing and disseminating SOAR is to enable staff to (in turn) enable all students to integrate their personal, social, academic and career development. If this is not done explicitly, it is usually difficult for individuals to perceive and articulate how their seemingly disparate experiences and activities contribute to a personally meaningful, relevant process of development in relation to their long-term career aspirations. This is not just about getting employment at the end of a course; nor can it be assumed that employment will automatically follow if a student is on a vocational course. The methods are

designed to facilitate students progressively through reflective-active, structured and supported learning; intended to give them a greater sense of personal agency, direction and destination; and empowering them to deal more effectively and productively with contemporary learning, work and life.

As one reviewer commented:

> **The book addresses a key and continuing need: how we support the transition from student to graduate, and lay the foundations for sustainable employability and a fulfilling life in an increasingly competitive world. Arti's book delivers both understanding and practical tools for enabling the shift our students need to make.** *(Rob Ward, Director, the Centre for Recording Achievement)*

The SOAR model achieves this by enabling individuals to appreciate how their inner world of *self* engages with and is influenced by the outer world of *opportunity* and *others.* This S–O dynamic is largely responsible for the *aspirations* we generate and the ***r****esults* we achieve. Each of these dimensions is both universal and personal, and is inter-connected within the wider framework. It is in understanding the combinations, permutations, intersections and constructive alignment of these four dimensions that synergy is created in student self-development.

> **It is in the animation and meaning-making of PDP that SOAR has much to offer… It is a comprehensive tool to help teachers operationalise and contextualise the ideals of PDP. Different parts of the tool have the potential to promote personal enquiry, the discovery or re-discovery of self and the building of identity through participation and active engagement with opportunities for learning within and outside the curriculum (so much useful learning gained from experience outside the formal curriculum is ignored in higher education). The learning processes that the tool supports helps learners to develop realistic aspirations and intentions that can motivate and help them achieve the results they desire, and help grow the confidence in their own ability to meet future challenges.** *(Prof. Norman Jackson, Director, Surrey CETL in Kumar 2007 p. xiii)*

Generating synergy through the interplay between the SOAR elements provides a way of scaffolding learner development (Vygotsky 1978), investing in the unique and special attributes of each individual, thereby fostering self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1997), self-regulation (Zimmerman 2001) and intentionality (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1989). These are all in essence personal and social constructionist approaches, enabling educators to facilitate students through a process of development that is much broader than teaching subject knowledge or technical expertise alone. The resulting range of skills and attributes that students personalise and enhance can be applied in engaged academic learning as well as in life-careers, so that they move gradually from student, to graduate, to professional identity.

Enabling this type of identity formation may be thought of as the primary purpose of HE, but it is often a tacit ideal that does not translate into reality. The resources and methods associated with each dimension of SOAR need educators to contextualise them explicitly within curricula. A parallel process and dual purpose is implicitly at work here: if we educators use this pedagogy as an interactive, formative process in partnership with our students, we can apply and role-model the same principles in our own personal and professional development.

How my practice evolved

I developed the SOAR process of learning, assessment and development over several years. Initially my practice was motivated and informed through my own lived experience of being lost in the transition from university to work. I graduated with a First Class Honours degree but had no idea what I could offer any employer from the content of my major in English Literature, and modules I had chosen out of innate interest in Social Science and Humanities subjects. Where could my interests, abilities and personal styles find a fit in the sea of opportunities that might exist in the world of work? I was relatively new to the UK and did not have the confidence and language to claim and promote employability attributes, even though I had worked in

three employment sectors and two different countries by that time. And my sons were growing up but I still prioritised parenting values. I could have articulated parenting skills and school-familiarity as additional experiential assets, but most employers perceived children as a constraint. In other ways too I was led to believe that my age, gender and ethnicity added up to multiple disadvantage in the job market.

For a few years after graduating I fell into low-paid, part-time jobs within easy travelling distance of home. I did administrative and resources work, taught in adult education, trained teachers on the Regional Certificate of Education and did the diploma in Careers Guidance. These experiences and qualifications were to stand me in good stead, even though I thought of them as chance and luck. In retrospect, I see the relevance of what the Roman philosopher Seneca is reputed to have said: "Luck is the meeting of preparation with opportunity." It is possible to proactively create our own luck and commit to the choices we make with positive attitudes. This is a key concept for students to appreciate, and is central within the SOARing to Success pedagogy that subsequently evolved.

Having worked in schools and colleges for several years as a careers adviser, I was eventually able to bring together my teaching and careers qualifications to focus on careers education when I entered a university careers service that wholly owned and delivered a generic career development module. The module was accredited and assessed – therefore theoretically sound, empirically evidenced, based on the experiential knowledge of practitioners and advice of external examiners, and evaluated through cycles of pedagogic action research. Student evaluations consistently suggested that this popular module was relevant for all and should be more widely available. However, we careers advisers could only accommodate a maximum of 60 students in each semester. I developed a variety of practical group-coaching methods and assessments that could be blended with the transmission of theoretical concepts. This proved possible even with large groups followed by smaller interactive group sessions. It quickly became a passion for me to enable student self-development through pedagogy that links career management skills with 'learnability' and employability attributes.

SOAR pedagogy is also based on the long experience of responding to the growing complexity and diversity of demands facing my academic and learning support colleagues. It integrates the fragmented nature of learner development and addresses the needs and expectations of key stakeholders:

- Students' needs:
  - to learn their discipline and develop skills in a more holistic, personalised and intentional way;
  - to engage with experiences and developmental opportunities within and outside the formal curriculum;
  - to identify, critically appreciate and evidence their personal strengths;
  - to enhance the generic attributes that make them effective and productive in learning and work;
  - to record their specific achievements in an (e)-portfolio, thus contributing to a richer picture of their attainments and aspirations;
  - to select and present relevant information to employers and other selectors, especially at the point of graduation;
  - to consider and prepare for self-employment as a viable option;
  - to possess the ability to demonstrate employability attributes on paper and in person when applying for jobs.
- Teachers' needs:
  - to contextualise and operationalise the ideals of personal and professional development;
  - to motivate and enable a diverse body of students to engage with good learning in their subject discipline;
  - to create a more open, explicit and transparent curriculum linked with the development of graduate attributes;
  - to encourage and facilitate students through different and possibly unfamiliar methods of learning and assessment;

- to demonstrate the defined activities, core knowledge and values in supporting student learning set out in the United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF);
- to invest in their own continuing professional development.

> Careers advisers' needs:

- to empower all students to manage more unstable and competitive life-careers (Jarvis 2002; Arthur 2003);
- to deliver or contribute to career and employability development as part of HE courses;
- to reframe 'career' as 'lifelong and life-wide learning', defining it not so much as occupational titles but as an individual's portable personal skills and values (Straby 2002 – as part of a redefined contemporary career paradigm congruent with the 'Blueprint for Career Development' project in Canada and Australia, published in 2007).
- The skill needs of graduate recruiters, which show considerable similarity and consistency over time in what employers generically seek across different occupations and national boundaries (for example, annual AGR surveys; CIHE; UKCES report 2008, 2009; CBI and UUK 2009; CBI and NUS 2011. Also see AGCAS and NASES visits to China in 2009, and India in 2010).

> the Government's expectations that the higher education sector will produce a workforce with high-level skills: individuals capable of adding value to themselves and others, and to the economy:

- this was implicit in the PDP agenda in the UK, which called on all HEIs to offer "a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development"[1];
- reinforced by subsequent White Papers (e.g. Leitch 2006);
- the Burgess Review (2007) which required all HEIs to provide a Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) detailing and validating each student's skills and experiences in addition to the degree certificate at graduation.

The sector has responded variably to these requirements. At the University of Bedfordshire, the PDP agenda was taken seriously and I was appointed to design new, subject-based, first year PDP modules, for delivery in faculty-based partnerships involving careers, library and academic staff. I provided online content for students to use in homework.

I had also written a student text to fill a gap in the market, entitled: *Your future – a guide to career development*. This later proved to be the forerunner for my secondment to University of Reading, specifically to write up the web-based package we called *Career Management Skills online*. Reading Careers Service rolled this out with their policy and my training, to enable key staff to deliver it as an accredited module for all students. They subsequently sold the package to 60+ other HEIs and won a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) based on this outstanding careers work.

Back at the University of Bedfordshire we similarly won our CETL project funding in the area of PDP implementation, where I was instrumental. As CETL Associate Director, I collaborated with colleagues and led CETL projects which perceived the paramount need to move away from the dominant teacher-centric paradigm of delivering the curriculum through knowledge transfer in lectures alone (although this method still has a place). We undertook a systematic review drawing on internal and sectoral good practice, revised the curriculum at a whole-institution level and embedded SOAR as a process to operationalise realistic learning and personalised development in all subject areas (Atlay, Gaitan and Kumar2008).

[1] As defined by national UK *Guidelines for Progress Files* (QAA 2001b)

Innovating in...

Pedagogic design

As you see in the table reproduced here, the four dimensions of SOAR provide the structural design framing employability curricula. An example of a flexible SOAR module, together with scheduled in-class and homework topics, is given in Kumar (2007, pp. 50-3). This design positions *self* (the learner) at the centre of the SOAR process, encouraging ownership of learning and personal agency in self-development. It presents self-assessment as an essential educational and business need and not as indulgent introspection, but it also prompts self-actualisation in humanitarian terms.

University of Bedfordshire

SOAR a dynamic, reflective process for personalised learning and development

	Self-awareness	Opportunity-awareness	Aspirations	Results
Definition	*An awareness of the characteristics that define the person one is and wants to become.*	*An awareness of the possibilities that exist, the demands they make and the rewards and satisfactions they offer.*	*The ability to make realistic choices and plans based on sound information and on self– opportunity alignment.*	*The ability to review outcomes, plan and take action to implement decisions and aspirations, especially at points of transition.*
Learning outcomes	Students understand themselves more holistically and realistically: - assess their behaviours and actions in learning, work and life; - identify, articulate and evidence their strengths; - address their learning needs more intentionally and developmentally in relation to the results they want and need to achieve.	Students clarify ideas about options and curriculum choices, leisure activities, occupations and employer-organisations relevant and realistically available to them. Students recognise and access learning opportunities inside and outside the curriculum – the knowledge, skills and attributes these develop. They also identify their relationship to the demands of an ever-changing world.	Students generate, clarify and test aspirations, decide and plan how to implement them for the present and for their short, medium and long-term futures. Students make decisions about curriculum choices and career options informed by – and based on – the extent to which they fit self with opportunity.	Students need to start with the end in mind, and set personal goals in full awareness of the results expected by tutors, employers or other selectors. Students articulate, evaluate and demonstrate the results they achieve, and become more objective in using feedback constructively.
Curriculum content / assessment	Realistic self-awareness is helped by providing self-audits, appropriate external reference points, tools, resources and constructive feedback from others – thus enabling students to build Self-**MAP**s for their journey through HE and beyond.	A job-study or project can require students to research and analyse the extent to which their composite Self-MAP fits with the demands of their chosen occupation / option. A transparent, open curriculum aids an understanding of context.	Activity focuses on both the content and process of effective decision-making and action-planning. Students' aspirations are informed by what they might gain from their course, from each unit and from every learning activity.	Students own their goals and see relevance in curricula if their development is prompted by end-results, clear criteria, explicit rationale and constructive feedback (from peers, tutors, employers).
Abilities and attributes deployed & developed	**MAP** stands for three important dimensions: - **M**otivation (interests, values) - **A**bility (behavioural competencies) - **P**ersonality (interactions with others, innate preferences). o Self-assessment o Self-esteem / confidence o Self-development o Self-efficacy o Self-management o Self-promotion	Social learning, team/group working, and the ability to build effective relationships with others (students, tutors and employers) develops essential transferable employability attributes. o Information literacy o Research and evaluation o Networking o Critical analysis o Group-working o Interpersonal skills	Hence students need to know explicitly about these outcomes, and be helped to interpret and personalise how these outcomes transfer into further study, work and life in general. o Self–opportunity matching o Decision-making o Problem-solving o Goal-setting o Action-planning o Self-motivation	Activity, assignments and feedback enable students to evidence and demonstrate the results of SOARing, through self-promotion on paper (in assessments, CVs, applications), and in person (at interviews and assessment centres). o Results-orientation o Self-promotion skills o Communication o Team effectiveness o Interpersonal skills o Evaluative skills

For further details see **www.beds.ac.uk/learning/curriculum/structures/cre8**

Self-awareness is essentially a meta-skillset – an over-arching awareness that enables students to reflect, identify and critically appreciate their level of ability, interest and confidence in other skills such as communication, information literacy, problem-solving, team effectiveness, emotional and social competencies, etc. This meta-skillset is vital in understanding the extent to which such abilities can apply and transfer between one context and another. It plays an essential role in adapting to different contexts and managing oneself through time and under pressure. There is plenty of research evidence to show that intra-personal and inter-personal skills are connected: the better we understand and value ourselves the more we can understand and value others (Branden 2001).

Accordingly, learning about *self* is designed as a psycho-social construct: the way we see ourselves is strongly influenced by the stream of feedback we receive in our interactions with others and with different situations. The definitions of each dimension you see in the table look distinct from each other in a linear design, but in practice the curriculum content and assessments enable students to analyse and synthesise the permutations, combinations and intersections between SOAR elements, which are universal and archetypal patterns even as they are unique and particular to each individual *self*.

In summary, this pedagogic design enables learners to make connections as follows:

- identify their strengths and development needs in relation to (and in alignment with) the results required by themselves, tutors and employers;
- critically appreciate and promote strengths that arise from their motivation, ability and **p**ersonality (Self-MAPs);
- explore the extent to which a Self-MAP aligns with the type of MAP required for a chosen *opportunity* they aspire to (an occupation, job, employer-organisation or self-employment);
- use their Self-MAPs to engage developmentally with others and with opportunities in learning, work and life;
- generate, clarify, test and implement aspirations through soundly informed decisions and plans;
- achieve and record broader competencies, demonstrate and evaluate results.

In terms of *opportunity-awareness, s*o much valuable experience and skills development takes place outside the curriculum, but the learning from these opportunities is ignored and inadequately presented on graduate applications. Employers expect to see 'a rounded individual', and job-seekers must understand how to present their personal information convincingly tailored to the opportunity they are applying for. The learning that flows from the *self-opportunity* dynamic helps learners to articulate and defend soundly-informed, realistic *aspirations* and intentions. These in turn can motivate them to achieve the *results* they desire, because they perceive how their choices, participation, and engagement in their current studies, create their futures.

Congruently with constructive alignment, I used the principles of backward design: I started with the learning and performance outcomes (the desired results, goals and standards that students need to achieve in order to graduate and transition successfully into life beyond HE). These outcomes are expressed in the *results* dimension of SOAR. For example, all students need skills in self-promotion, articulated on CVs/resumés, applications or business plans, or via LinkedIn profiles – so these *results* were designed into a final assessment in the module.

Graduate applicants also need to demonstrate a range of employability attributes in person, at interviews and assessment centre events. I defined these attributes in more detail from primary research with employer bodies such as the Association of Graduate Recruiters. Analysing information from relevant survey reports and literature was simply the experiential professional knowledge I needed in my work as a careers adviser and educator.

As part of an Assessment Centres project I initiated at the University of Bedfordshire, I attended and observed some employers' assessment centres to seek detailed criteria they use in recruiting talent. Showing students the AGCAS DVD on assessment centres is a powerful way of making 'skills' visible and comprehensible as the behavioural competencies employers want and they need to develop. They begin with the end-*result* in mind, see the relevance of engaging in SOARing, and share an understanding of the criteria against which they can assess themselves and others. Having competitive real-life goals keeps students both challenged and motivated (see Kumar 2009a, 2009b).

Working backwards then, I designed these performance outcomes into a series of self-audits which express the main skill-sets as the behavioural competencies employers generically seek across occupations, over time and even across national boundaries in a global knowledge economy. At this macro-level, improving relationship-building; working in teams and communicating with others; using information with appropriate analysis and synthesis; and persevering despite obstacles, are attributes that make individuals more effective, engaged and generally successful. The generic nature of these attributes lends itself to an institutional desire and need to incorporate 'graduate attributes' into curricula and prepare all students for professional life beyond their studies.

At the micro-level of the individual, employability is defined as each student's unique possession of a composite self-MAP, derived from the three essential inter-linked dimensions of *motivation*, *ability* and

personality. Identifying one's MAP is not easy, however, as the language of skills is increasingly complex and means different things in different contexts. For example 'the drive for results' is a term used often by employers, but how should students interpret the requirements and demonstrate this drive? Self-audits play an important part in making skills and performance criteria transparent and accessible to students. I designed them as a checklist of criterion-referenced behaviours or 'competencies-in-practice' that make people effective in demonstrating the skill-set in question.

Students are asked to rate the *extent to which they behave* like each item in the self-audit; to evidence their ratings with real-life examples; to plan to change personal behaviours that are not productive; to identify and make best use of opportunities and experiences where the requisite behaviours can be improved. Extension activities challenge students to substantiate their claims and provide evidence, as they would have to do in applications and real-life interviews. Peers challenge each other in mock interview exercises, using real questions from employers.

We human beings are, however, complex and unique creatures. One self-audit tool will not prompt sufficient analysis and a critical appreciation of one's strengths, limitations, interests and preferences. In animating and contextualising SOAR, students benefit from combining a number of different but complementary approaches to build mini self-maps as part of their developmental process. The model enables learners to become more intentional and balanced in their learning styles.

The assessments require students to use self-audits as reflective aids for personalisation in their own time and also to use them as criteria for observing and assessing their peers in classroom exercises. They prepare four-minute verbal presentations which are part of a continuous in-class assessment model. These weekly presentations in small groups invite peer feedback and act as formative learning (alongside discussions and activities) towards a key summative assessment on *self*, which requires students to write analytically about their personal strengths and development needs.

Both formative and summative assessment methods are designed in such a way that they build on one another and directly target multiple employability outcomes. Students can clearly see how their learning experiences and assessments are milestones and signposts in the journey to their destination at graduation. SOAR self-assessments can be aligned, sequenced, or scaffolded as navigational tools that also connect students with the skill outcomes of a course or module (Brown and Dove1993). Students can use them as diagnostic self-ratings and return to them after a period of time to evaluate the extent to which they have progressed in terms of developing their behavioural competencies.

It is likely to be universally accepted that journeys benefit from maps and plans if the traveller wishes to arrive at a destination. Self-MAPping is presented to students for use as both a compass to find direction and a tool to identify suitable destinations along the pathway of their life-career journey. SOAR pedagogy is designed as a developmental journey through HE that each student will need to navigate personally and collectively, in collaboration with peers, tutors, and ideally employers as well.

Students benefit in many ways when they perceive the relevance and importance of their studies as an important phase in their life-career journeys. They can then bridge back to previous learning, bridge through each component of their curriculum, and bridge forward into careers of lifelong learning. Bridging is then about making integrative and congruent connections from one topic and level of study to another, and from HE to work and life beyond.

How this practice is situated theoretically

SOAR is informed by an eclectic mix of social science theories. They collectively provide the data for the practice that best delivers the benefits of *SOAR for Employability*. These fall into three broad categories, as follows:

1. **Career theories** (Watts and Hawthorn 1992)

SOAR is a re-interpreted, expanded and updated variant of the DOTS and new-DOTS models which represent career theories that have evolved over the past century. DOTS stands for Decision-learning, Opportunity-awareness, Transition skills and Self-awareness. These concepts underpin the design of many a careers education programme, but a discrepancy occurs because the logical order in which career learning is structured in practice starts with self-awareness, moving on to opportunity-awareness, decision-learning, information and transition skills. However this gives us the unattractive acronym SODiT.

I have re-focused SODiT as SOAR for a variety of reasons. As a verb, soaring to success gives a positive impression of development and progress towards a successful end result. As an acronym, Self, Opportunity, Aspirations and Results logically structures the sequence of sessions, positioning *self* at the heart of each personal learning journey. My approach in practice is to get students to critique theories in relation to their real-life experience, rather than treat them as received wisdom to be accepted without question. Accordingly, I turned theories into exercises, reflective aids and discussion points interspersed through the course.

Self is underpinned by psychological career theories:

- trait and factor theories emphasise what people can be shown to be like, in their abilities, attainment and personality;
- self-concept theories emphasise the importance of how people see themselves, and how this changes over time.

Opportunity is underpinned by sociological career theories. For example, opportunity structure theory (Roberts 1977) emphasises the external constraints acting on individuals in their particular socio-economic and cultural positions. Opportunity is differentially available to each of us and we have little choice as we are channelled into the workforce depending on the family and ethnic group to which we were born, the neighbourhood in which we grew up, the school we attended, and so on.

Community interaction theory (Law 1981b) is more optimistic because it offers enabling possibilities for individuals. It adopts a composite, mid-range focus between the psychological and sociological positions, drawing upon both types of approach. Law posits that it is not the macro-level structure of society that determines the occupations people enter but a whole range of small-scale influences and exchanges that occur between ourselves and the people with whom we are in community contact. It is in these different groups, of which we are members, that crucial determinants act, both to transmit motivation and also to modify social functioning. I adapted this theory into a practical exercise for students to use as a reflective aid (Kumar 2007, p. 186), to support them in identifying relevant influences, assets and constraints in their life-careers so far. Some of their circumstances may be negative, but then tutors can encourage them to proactively seek positive influences and developmental opportunities available to them, such as networking, mentoring, work-related learning and work placements.

The community-interaction exercise combines well with the lifeline exercise (Kumar 2007, pp. 102-3) and is congruent with Career Narrative theory (McMahon and Watson 2010, 2012). The story-telling approach is based on Systems Theory, which elicits the complexity of students' lives: their reflections about the main events, key people, milestones and decision points in their past lives, prompting them to engage a wider network of relationships and experiences for present and future career development.

Aspirations is underpinned by theories related to decision-making and goal-setting linked with self-efficacy (Watts *et al*. 1996). Career Decision Learning theory (Law 1992; 2010) draws together the main lessons from both sociological and psychological perspectives, and overlays them with dynamic concepts of decision learning, leading eventually to sustainable action. I also use the zig-zag model of decision-making and problem-solving (Kumar 2007 p. 237) that comes from the Myers Briggs Type Indicator – the practical MBTI tool based on G.G. Jung's theory of personality types. MBTI concepts and resources can enable staff and students to identify the strengths and blind spots that arise from their preferred styles of interaction with

others and with different situations. It has proved invaluable for appreciating individual differences and valuing diversity, leading to team effectiveness.

2. **Constructive alignment**

SOAR pedagogy is based on the twin principles of constructivism (Piaget, Bruner, etc.) and alignment (Biggs and Tang 2011). Students construct and achieve graduate employability outcomes through both personal and social constructivist methods. The learning objectives, methods and assignments are closely and explicitly aligned with the learning outcomes, so self-awareness and opportunity-awareness are triggered by 'starting with the end results in mind' (as described in the 'Pedagogic design' section).

3. **Appreciative inquiry**

I like the values that arise from appreciative inquiry (AI) for their potential to engage students in positive self-development. Originally developed in the US (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987) and applied to organisational development, AI re-frames a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) to one based on SOAR: an exploration of the *strengths* in any given situation, the *opportunities* that are available and possible in order to achieve *aspirations* and positive *results*. The philosophy is one of believing that whatever we focus on appreciates in value, much as a property would increase in price when its positive features are marketed.

An AI approach to *self* uses my terminology of *self as hero in the journey of life-career.* This positive psychology implies that every student has the capacity to take control, improve and move towards successful *results* or learning outcomes. The mindset enables individuals to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses and external threats. This can go a long way towards breaking the ice of unproductive self-talk and limiting self-beliefs. When SOAR resources enable students to realise there is much more to them than academic skills and intellectual ability alone, they generate positive energy to address their development needs. The latter are not ignored or glossed over – the AI approach simply emphasises and aligns a person's unique self-MAP more optimistically with available options and developmental opportunities. Results are understood as both an individually and collectively defined set of criteria, based on the common ground between scholarship and professionalism.[2]

Relevant context

I have already touched on context when describing how I developed my practice. The context for SOAR components of study have varied, depending on the subject discipline and level of study. Some have been delivered as optional or mandatory discrete 12-week modules as part of undergraduate studies, and some are more generic than discipline-specific or occupation-specific. However the fundamental design of employability development remains based on SOAR content, concepts and practices in teaching, learning and assessment.

In summary, SOAR pedagogy was initially developed in designing and delivering the generic Career Development Module at University of Bedfordshire, and subsequently transferred to subject-based PDP modules, all at undergraduate level. Further developments under our CETL embedded SOAR as a process in 'CRe8' – Curriculum Review for implementation in 2008 – across all subject fields in the whole-institution. More recently, in 2010-11, a new SOAR-framed Personal and Professional Development Unit was introduced into postgraduate courses such as the MBA in Intercultural Communications, with very positive impact.

[2] Please see references section for other applied theoretical concepts I have used, such as Belbin (1991; 2000) on team roles, Gardner (1999) on Multiple Intelligences and Goleman (1996) on Emotional Intelligence.

Since then, SOAR has broken disciplinary, institutional and national boundaries, transferring into a variety of contexts in the UK and also.

Evidence of impact

SOAR pedagogy has been empirically evaluated with many cohorts of undergraduate students at the University of Bedfordshire. Owning and personalising the lexicon of 'skills' as their personal behaviours and actions has proven very beneficial for students, regardless of their age, background, subject and level of study. SOAR typically enhances confidence and competence as students identify, critically appreciate, develop and articulate their skills, knowledge, attributes and experiences in a broader holistic frame that draws also upon their life-wide experiences (e.g. see Kumar 2007, p. 278).

From 2005 to 2010 the CETL at University of Bedfordshire revised its curriculum offering at a whole-institution level and embedding components of personal and professional development into all its subject areas. SOAR was adopted into employability strategy, policy and practice, and widely disseminated as a process that begins at induction and continues through course levels, with individual (e)-portfolios and *SOARing* resources facilitating and enabling the development of employability. By this time the book (Kumar 2007) and online content had made the SOAR pedagogy available and accessible to all, so that staff could pick, mix and contextualise the methods to suit different subjects and students, in both real and virtual learning environments.

Staff who have been introduced to these approaches find them interesting and useful, but are sometimes constrained by the practicalities and demands of implementation: the time and resources required, the change in their roles from 'teacher' to 'facilitator and guide', getting to grips with the different methods of setting up activities and engaging students. Those staff at University of Bedfordshire who used assessment-centre approaches continue to be enthused by their potential to release the motivation and learning power of students. SOAR pedagogy also framed projects undertaken by the Action Research Consortium at the University of Bedfordshire in 2008-10, where I aligned the personal and professional development of staff with pedagogic action research processes (Kumar 2009b, pp. 254-66).

My NTF funding further made it possible to disseminate SOAR at workshops and conferences abroad as well as across the UK. It is therefore being used in a variety of contexts, with evidence of very positive results, in some other UK HEIs and in Australia, Denmark, South Africa and the Netherlands (Kumar 2013, p. 225-7).

Since much evidence of impact has been published previously I give just one evaluation recently sent to me via personal email communication:

> **Regarding SOAR, I use it extensively with the full time MBA students in the Executive Development Project and with the MBA Executives (part time) in the UK and Oman. It is useful for career development, using MAP, and in reflection to gain better self-awareness. With the Executive Development Project, I combine S (Self) with the MBTI concepts and Johari – particularly useful if students have little or no work experience on which to reflect. They can instead reflect on incidents in their personal or work life to demonstrate the evidence from the tests. I use O (Opportunity) with the Community Interaction exercise to discuss opportunities in the wider world. (A - Aspirations) identifies what they want and they develop a plan to help them achieve the Results. We also look at KSAAs (knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes) as well as other SOAR self-audits – 'Drive for Results', Kolb etc. SOAR tools have been useful to help the MBA students understand their present and potential KSAAs as well as identify and plan towards their ambitions.** *(Tricia Smart, Programme Manager for the MA in Intercultural Communications)*

How others might adapt or adopt this practice

Employability initiatives are sometimes perceived by staff as additional complexities that are imposed on them when all they want to do is teach their subject discipline. Similarly, students may expect to simply study their chosen subject(s) in traditional ways. It is vital for both staff and students to see SOAR as an important, relevant, challenging and motivating process that links current 'learnability' with future employability and 'earnability'.

SOARing is different from teaching a subject or training for skills-development, although both these approaches play some part. Students should be required, supported and motivated to undertake appreciative inquiries into *self* and *opportunity* against explicit external reference points, using diagnostic/evaluative self-audits, discussion and activities, informed by peer, tutor, and employer feedback. It is essentially a model for holistic development that is intended to broaden the frames of reference for 'learning' and 'assessment', so that these are:

- recognised as contributing to personal, professional and academic purposes;
- applied to both current studies and future graduate employability;
- 'owned' as the responsibility of the learner and facilitated by various learning enablers (including peers, alumni and employers);
- identified and valued wherever they occur – both within a formal structured curriculum or outside in work, extra-curricular activities and life experiences;
- driven by attitudes that lead to the willingness and ability to engage in lifelong learning.

The learning and assessment methods inevitably change the identity of the teacher from a knowledgeable subject expert to a guide/coach/manager and facilitator of student-centred and lifelong, life-wide learning. Learning is not confined to information and knowledge that is provided or transmitted by the teacher in class, but is derived from individual and collective reflections and actions, both within and outside the formal curriculum, and is applicable to real life.

The emphasis on motivating learners to engage in activities that develop graduate attributes involves teachers in creating and managing classroom environments where more active, interactive and collaborative learning takes place in groups. The methods are congruent with 'flipped learning' which is gaining currency in some academic circles, and which (especially like the SOAR assessment model) requires students to learn and prepare in their own time so that class time is free for sharing, discussing, giving and receiving feedback, problem-solving and decision making, etc.

Appropriately facilitated, SOAR enables students to generate end-goals and *aspirations* that are relevant to them so that they 'start with the end *results* in mind'. For example, if they are required to develop a particular skill-set such as information literacy, problem-solving or team-effectiveness, they need to understand what these look like in practice, in terms of the effective behaviours and actions that are involved, and the standards that are expected from both tutor and employer perspectives.

SOAR needs to be interpreted, implemented and facilitated effectively through policy and practice. It is best understood as the distinct pedagogy described above and in my previous publications: a pedagogy that values students as active partners in learning, evaluation and research rather than as passive recipients of knowledge transfer. Assessment, learning and teaching may vary according to the discipline, the needs of students, and the environment in which they undertake SOAR, but who will ensure that the outcomes achieved reach the required standard and are being consistently implemented? The ideal would be for HEIs to ensure that:

- policies set and monitor principles and standards so that all students receive a validated and quality-assured experience of *SOAR*ing, ensuring fairness and consistency no matter what they are studying;
- the design and delivery, resources and techniques are appropriately incorporated, facilitated and subjected to robust evaluation;

- the formative and ipsative process of development incorporates giving, receiving and using constructive feedback as part of the process of developing higher order skills;
- the frames of reference for assessment are broadened, to include self-assessment, peer observation and feedback, tutor and employer assessment;
- a variety of methods are used for enabling learning so that the needs and preferences of different learners are met;
- opportunities are available for students to make the most of experiential learning from analysis and synthesis, reflection and action;
- the rich diversity of students' backgrounds is recognised and valued, especially in projects and assignments which incorporate global exposure; for example, give European and international students a voice in inquiries and group work, enabling them to contribute alongside home students, to share their perspectives and labour market information from their countries of origin;
- staff development to deliver in this different mind-set and mode provides ongoing support and opportunities for staff to share examples of good practice.

Many HEIs have also formulated policies and practices for PDP in relation to (e)-portfolios. Reflecting, planning, recording, and evaluating are integral functions within SOAR so it is an excellent vehicle for the PDP and HEAR agenda in the UK, which requires students to reflect, record and plan in paper-based or computer-based formats. Such records can in themselves provide evidence of the results and benefits for individuals.

SOAR can enhance four main types of PDP records:

a. Learners record the process of their learning, development and achievement for their own purposes, using (e)-portfolios as an aid to personal reflection and self-assessment. The responsibility and ownership rests with them.
b. More formal records may be required at a later stage, for the purposes of external assessment by tutors or employers – usually word processed documents such as CVs (resumes) or Linked-In profiles, but final show-reels, art and design assignments, and audio-visual media may meet the needs of students in visual and performance arts or media studies.
c. These documents may build up to recording in respect of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), transitioning through programme levels and beyond.
d. e-Recording can be carried across sectors flexibly, travelling with the learner from sub-degree level through HE and into continuous professional development at work. (Kumar 2007, p. 274)

Because we are aiming at self-motivated, realistic, holistic development, faculty staff should ideally work in productive partnerships with learning support professionals such as careers advisers and library staff. It is good practice to invite alumni, graduate employers and professional bodies to contribute to the learning outcomes, while also signposting students to relevant extra-curricular opportunities that develop employability.

SOAR is not a rigid or prescriptive model, however. It provides a range of examples and resources that bridge the divide between disciplines and between terms such as academic, vocational, personal and professional. Integrating between bipolar positions is a key success factor in implementing the model. And there is considerable flexibility for educators to pick and mix the tools and techniques to suit their discipline, their students and teaching environments.

I believe that *SOAR* is capable of supporting the design, delivery and evaluation of curricula anywhere in the world where pedagogy needs to engage students in integrated personal development, career management and employability skills. This contention could also be explored in a more robust manner, to evaluate how the SOAR model relates to the needs of international students and graduates, and whether it is equally applicable in countries of a non-Western tradition.

Conclusion

SOAR can provide solutions for many of the issues facing staff and students in HE today – but ideally the model needs to be incorporated into a structured and supported process of integrated development for all students, preferably within the curriculum. The active, realistic and collaborative approaches that are recommended are those that can enable deep learning in academic disciplines as well as enhance broader employability competencies. Although a whole variety of excellent resources are available (many freely accessible online and in university careers services), staff may need support in choosing and contextualising these within curricula. Staff development set-up in multi-disciplinary groups is a good way forward for staff to discuss and share good practice on how to facilitate learners through the SOAR process.

In conclusion, I believe that *SOAR* pedagogy incorporates quality learning experiences that enable students to develop and promote an authentic sense of self, and use this ability to access and engage developmentally with opportunities – even sometimes to create suitable opportunities. They develop these abilities in a constructive, relational and scaffolded structure. The learning and assessment objectives and methods are aligned with each other and the course outcomes in a coherent process which requires students to engage in higher-order thinking, and the practical activities are challenging, interesting, and motivating. I submit this pedagogy for you to implement, evaluate and improve through your own experience.

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