



Teaching Soft Skills: Towards a Paradigm Shift in Practice Pedagogy and Evaluation: The Case of Ensam Meknés

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Article History

Received: 05.04.2022

Accepted: 12.05.2022

Published: 19.05.2022

Abstract: It is often said that hard skills or technical knowledge will get you an interview but soft skills will tremendously increase your chances to get and keep the job. Hard skills are the skills or technical knowledge we need to do our job adequately, whereas human skills are the skills we need to be better human beings with a better character. Hard skills answer the question of how well you can do at work. Soft skills or human skills, however, answer the questions like what kind of person you are. How well you can get on with people around you. Are you someone people can trust and feel comfortable working with or someone people distrust because you are annoying as a team member, you constantly get people into unnecessary arguments or you make them uncomfortable because of your negative mind set and/or suspicious attitude?. It seems, therefore, that teaching human skills is no longer a luxury but an obligation. The problem, however, is that oftentimes our attempt to teach essential life skills consists simply of teaching about them; we mistakenly treat life skills like hard skills both at the level of instruction and evaluation. We assume that teaching a set of vocabulary items or concepts related to soft skills would suffice to help student acquire those skills. This paper suggests that soft Skills cannot be taught; they are caught. For this reason, it is contended that there is a desperate need to see soft skills with a different lens. It puts forwards a paradigm shift in soft skill instruction in practice, pedagogy, and evaluation. It is high time we discontinued teaching life skills as a set of concepts and vocabulary items. Instead, we need to adopt a teaching though coaching and evaluation through experiential and oral schemes. We need to reconsider our role as soft skill teachers and students, our teaching methodology and finally the learning environment within which life skills are being developed and evaluated.

Keywords: Soft skills; hard skills; learning environment; paradigm shift in practice pedagogy and and evaluation.

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INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that the ultimate goal of education is to impart not only facts and knowledge but mainly life skills and values. According to John Dewey Schools are originally meant to prepare us for life through life. He asserts that "education is not preparation for life but life itself". This amounts to saying that the learning experiences that the students are exposed to in the classroom should be connected to /and deeply

rooted in the challenges and experiences that they will normally go through in their daily lives upon graduation as eventual individuals in society. This can be achieved by involving students in situations where they interact with each other, think freely and critically and get into the habit of using their brains. Students go to school to get training in how to think autonomously and creatively with the view to figure out solutions and fix problems in real life situations.

Citation: Brahim Khartite (2022). Teaching Soft Skills: Towards a Paradigm Shift in Practice Pedagogy and Evaluation: The Case of Ensam Meknés. *Glob Acad J Humanit Soc Sci*; Vol-4, Iss-3 pp- 97-102.

In fact, effective teachers are no longer those who teach what they know but those who inspire and make a difference in the life of each and every individual they teach. They are those who leave no stone unturned to prepare students for life. They avail students of ample opportunities to speak effortlessly in public, to think positively and reason logically and analytically. They are those who help students develop the good habits of listening actively and solving problem smartly. Modern schools are expected by all stakeholders to expose students to ample opportunities to interact verbally and nonverbally. Students who get into the habit of thinking open mindedly in class are the same students who grow up becoming used to choosing and solving their conflicts with a positive attitude and a win-win mindset. They are the same students who make informed decisions and take calculated risks when they experiment with new ideas in the workplace. They show all these soft skill qualities and on top of it they exhibit a strong willingness to assume responsibility of their choices when something goes wrong but celebrate when they make it. It is our duty as soft skills teachers to work on each and every student as a whole person. Our future engineers need to be well taken care of emotionally, ideationally, intellectually, cognitively; socially and relationally. We need to attend not only to the academic and intellectual aspects of the training, but also to the affective and interpersonal/relational and human side of every engineering student by reminding them that they are human being with feelings and emotions. They need to use both the logical and imaginative hemispheres of their brain

People tend to think of anything soft as something secondary, not essential, and less important. Yet trying to even imagine a life without soft skills would be difficult if not impossible. Sutton (2002) found that soft skills are so important that employers identify them as “the number one differentiator” for job applicants in all types of industries (p. 40). It is very difficult to imagine hiring an engineer if he or she does not show evidence of such life skills like effective problem solving; critical thinking; effective interpersonal communication (both verbal and non-verbal) and team work etc. Soft skills make it possible for us to live together. Without them human interaction would be impossible. In fact without soft skills none would be hireable and for the very few who are lucky enough to find a job, it would not be long before they either willingly turnover or get fired.

1. Hard Vs. Soft Skills

We talk about hard skills and soft skills as if they are in opposition to each other. Instead, we need to talk about technical skills and human skills

as complementary. Hard skills are the skills or technical knowledge we need to do our job adequately, and human skills are the skills we need to be better human beings. Soft skills oftentimes ‘influence’ or shape how we interact with one another and define our ability to relate and connect with people. While hard skills make us better managers, the human skills make better leaders (we manage things and we lead people). Perreault (2004) describes soft skills as “a set of personal qualities, attributes, talents, or the level of commitment that an individual can bring to the workplace that set him or her apart from other individuals who may have similar skills and experience” (p. 246). Hard skills and technical knowledge concern themselves with the question of how well we can do at work. They are observable, teachable and measurable (very easy to teach/test/score because they have to do with our knowledge/performance) Soft skills or human skills; however, answer the question what kind of person you are. How well you can get on with people around you. Are you someone they can trust and feel comfortable working with or someone annoying that everybody tries to avoid because you constantly get people into trouble, you make them uncomfortable or you make their life miserable?

We devote a lot of time and energy (courses) teaching hard skills and we thrust aside soft skills assuming they are secondary or of less importance. In fact there is nothing soft about soft skills; they are essential skills that make all the difference among engineering graduates sitting for job interviews. Based on existing evidence from employers and recruiters, it is becoming increasingly obvious that teaching human skills is no longer a luxury or a choice. According to Christopher (2006), employers want graduates with strong interpersonal abilities. Recruiter need to know that new recruits do care before they care what they know. Graduates; therefore, need be equipped with the necessary soft skills to obtain and retain employment in the twenty-first century workforce. This is perhaps why it is not uncommon for employers -when faced with two interviewees who are similar in all other aspects that are measurable (hard skills)- to resort to soft skills (personality, self knowledge; positive mindset/attitudes, good character) to make their final decision.

Having established that soft skills are different but crucially important, we need now ask the burning: what is the best way to go about teaching soft skills?

2. What is the best way to go about teaching soft skills?

Although there is a general consensus that soft skills are entirely different from hard skills it is still a common practice amongst many soft skill instructors to teach and evaluate both types of skills in the same way. This is still true at a time when there is ample evidence to believe that unlike hard skills which might be effortlessly transmitted in the form of lectures, soft skills can only be learned / through a process of getting students immersed in a learning environment that lends itself to an indirect acquisition of these types of skills. All along their acquisition of hard skills, students need - in almost every class they go- a learning environment that would help them hone the life skills they need to have developed by the time they graduate.

The classroom should offer ample communication opportunities for students to learn how to face an audience, how to empathise and take turns, and how to listen with the intent to understand and not reply or judge their interlocutors. How can we teach creativity if we only ask low order thinking questions i.e. closed questions or display question for which we already know the answer? An adequate soft skill class should instead encourage high order thinking questioning i.e. open ended and thought provoking questions. Only questions that stimulate deep thinking and challenge the students to push the boundaries and think outside of the box are likely to help students get into the habit of thinking critically. How can one teach tolerance, open mindedness and flexibility or intellectual curiosity if the learning environment is not anxiety free and if the students are not constantly reassured and reminded that their mistakes are learning opportunities and their questions are more than welcome? Students need something more important than physical security in a soft skill class; they need intellectual safety to make mistakes and take risks in their class with no fear of being judged or rejected.

3. Teaching Soft skills requires a Paradigm shift in practice pedagogy and curriculum

The underlying assumption of this paper is that teachers of communication and soft skills are essentially required to see soft skills with a different lens. It is high time we stopped treating human skills as though they are hard skills or technical knowledge to be imparted to the students. One cannot teach for instance resilience or intellectual curiosity or active listening the same way they would go about teaching history or mathematics. While the first is more of a mindset, soft skill or a way of life to be developed over a period of time, the second is more concerned with facts and fixed knowledge that might simply be transmitted,

understood and retained. Soft skills are therefore special, and they need special treatment both in terms of how they are taught and how they are evaluated. Soft skills in higher education are still treated like abstract knowledge and therefore never manage translate into actual behaviour or attitudes. Put more precisely, there are four major factors (aspects of teaching and learning) that need to be profoundly reconsidered and revisited. In fact, attending to these factors will have an enormous impact on the students' life skills proficiency level.

The paradigm shift this paper advocates is to discontinue teaching life skills as a set of concepts, vocabulary items or kind of tips on how to handle different situations. In much the same way we teach language for what it is meant for, namely communication, we need to start teaching soft skills through what they are originally meant for, namely optimize human interaction and maximize productivity when individuals are involved in some kind of team or project work. Soft skills are best acquired through practice, coaching, experiential learning and above all engaging tasks and activities. We need to shift gears from asking "what soft skills do we need to teach to asking "What kind of engaging/hands on tasks and what kind of situational or contextual variable" we need to attend to for students to gradually learn and master but most important of all practice and exhibit the targeted behaviour (students seem to know a lot about public speaking but only few of them can actually speak in public. To achieve this we must reconsider our conception of 1) the role of teachers and students, 2) the teaching methodology, 3) the difference between teaching a skill and teaching knowledge and finally 4) the learning environment.

3.1 The Teacher as a Facilitator and role Model

Our role as soft skill and communication teachers has to be redefined from that of a knowledge transmitter through lectures and class discussions to a facilitator in a space where interaction becomes the norm. We are no longer merely expected to teach students what to think; we are supposed to constantly aspire to inspire them until we expire or (we retire). It is our duty to shift gears from the role of knowledge provider to a knowledge activator, facilitator, co-learner, life skill mediator, personal developer, thought provoker and participant in meaning construction. This is all the more true given the fact that the learners in higher education are adults and the teachers are no longer the only source of information. Our challenge in the 21st century is to shift focus from teaching the three Rs (Reading writing and arithmetic's) to teaching the 3 C's (Complex problem solving, Critical Thinking; Creativity). It must be our priority as teachers of life skills to create real and authentic learning

opportunities that simulate real life-like situations in the classroom. These situations must resemble in many ways the ones that the engineering students will have to handle upon their graduation as future engineers.

Our mission is no longer limited to telling students what to think or what is wrong and what is right but we need figure ways to create learning opportunities where they get to take initiative to experiment with new ideas, to put forward hypotheses and eventually try to learn how to lead themselves and hopefully lead others in organizations. When it comes to soft skills our role as teachers is only to open the doors, it is up to the student to enter. We need to shift from a teacher centred approach or instruction to a learner centred pedagogy where students are fully engaged and trusted to assume responsibility of their own learning, where they are constantly kept busy interacting with each other to construct meaning/learning using their prior knowledge and past experience to explore new grounds of understanding and to fix problems through trial and error by engaging them in various situations similar to those they will inevitably face in the real world as grown ups.

Also, the teacher as a role model means we cannot teach what we don't know, and we cannot teach soft skills for which we cannot give a good example ourselves. Soft skills or character education are mostly about teaching by giving others a good example of where you want them to go. "You cannot lead people where you do not go yourself." We have to walk the talk otherwise how can one teach for example active listening if he/she happens to be someone who constantly interrupts others or finishes their own sentences? How can one help students have a voice or make a choice if they never have a say in their class in the first place? This implies that one of the biggest challenges facing us as teachers of soft skills is that of serving as role models of the life skills we want our engineering students to learn. (The first time I saw my Islamic Education teacher smoking I was shocked and I could not believe my eyes).

Therefore, whether we like it or not we need to give students a good example of the human skills we want them to develop and demonstrate by the end of a given period of instruction. When we go to a soft skills class, students don't learn what we know or what we tell or show them; they learn "who we are". Our actions and attitudes speak louder than our words and pieces of advice. This means that teachers cannot teach a quality that they are lacking themselves. How can one teach for example the students resilience, flexibility or creativity if they

keep doing the same thing in my class days in days out? How can one talk to students about work ethics, time management, calculated risk taking, or problem solving or critical thinking and thinking outside of the box if they –the teachers-always play it safe by restricting ourselves to their comfort zone doing the same thing they tried and tested before. How can we challenge the students to think deeply and profoundly and critically if we keep asking only display or boring questions for which everybody already knows the answer? Students need to see in class concrete instances which demonstrated that we practice what we preach and that we walk the talk. This is usually reflected in the quality of our every day classroom verbal interactions, pair or group work activities, tasks or project work we give as assignments.

3.2 Soft Skills Thrive in a Learner Centred Pedagogy

The role of students needs also to change drastically in a soft skill class. Not unlike teachers, students are often reluctant to leave their comfort zone as consumers of others' ideas. They come through an educational system/experience that made them mistakenly believe that they cannot have any of their own. They are accustomed to being tested in what they were taught and they only need to guess what is in the teacher mind. However, and this is true especially when it comes to soft skill, teaching for the test makes little or no sense because student need to be prepared for life and not for exams. Students, therefore, need to be made aware that they are not mere empty containers to be stuffed with abstract knowledge. They are no longer passive recipients of others readymade (including the teacher's) beliefs, ideas and information. Engineering students should understand that they are adults with rich and varied prior experiences that need to be valued and shared. Every engineering student is literally required to be an active agent in the contribution to and construction of the learning opportunities.

Learning life skills requires every student to be deeply engaged in the learning opportunities offered by the various interactions and spontaneous conversations, many of which are initiated by the students themselves in the classroom. They need, as a result, to be encouraged to take initiative to contribute to the quality of the learning experiences of soft skills generated by information/opinion gap activities that might at time involve challenging common sense or questioning existing opinions and beliefs (including that of the teacher himself or herself). For student to develop, for example, a positive attitude, to learn how to make choices, how to problem solve, make decision and eventually assume responsibility of their course of action they

must understand that everything they do in their soft skill class in school – be it ENSAM or elsewhere- is actually geared to helping them learn and practice all those human skills without which their hard skills/technical knowledge would be useless. Students must remember that their teachers' efforts, regardless of their specialty, are geared to preparing them for life by providing opportunities to make choices, to take initiative, and stick to their commitments when they make them. Students must be treated in the classroom like a small community- or future workplace- where they have the right to have a say not only in terms what is learned but also how it is learned and for what purpose.

3.3 Soft Skilled are Best Taught Indirectly in a Safe Learning Environment

Another major factor that needs revisiting is the learning environment. "Water your flowers to see them blossom; if they don't the problem is undoubtedly inherent in the environment where they grow or they are planted and that is what basically needs fixing" Maria Montessori 1946. Our students are the best out there. The reason they are admitted to enroll in this engineering school is that they are already excellent. Our learning environment must, therefore, lend itself to building and training the students on both hard and soft skills they are going to need to make it in their first interview for their dream job. John Dewey said that (and this is especially true when it comes to behaviour and attitude) all that we need is to "Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking and interaction; learning naturally results." This implies that the learning environment and the classroom language /practices/and interaction patterns must encourage open/meaningful conversations and co-construction of knowledge. As teacher of soft skills, we should not forget that students don't learn what we teach or what we show them; they learn what they live. What students often end up learning depends hugely on the culture that is prevalent in the learning environment where they are coached on a daily basis. In a famous poem she entitled "children learn what they live" N. Dorothy (2008) claims, and rightly so, that "If children live with ridicule they learn to be shy; if they live with fairness they learn justice; if they live with encouragement they learn to become self-confident; If they live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect; if they live with approval and acceptance they simply learn how to like themselves and appreciate who they are." In the same line of reasoning, soft skills cannot be taught directly; they are a by-product of the quality/type of learning environment in which the students grow up from a younger age. If you ask any students who is struggling with the fear of public speaking, also

known as gloss-phobia and they would be quick to share their personal stories of how they were ridiculed or laughed at or embarrassed a student at some point all along the way. Most students have a fear of facing an audience because they are scared to be judged negatively again because they have a feeling of déjà vu. Students leave their classes frustrated and confused with negative attitudes towards their learning or teachers because they are not encouraged to ask questions, make mistakes nor have a say on what and how they are taught. Soft skills are not learned from what we teach occasionally and explicitly; they are learned from what we do implicitly and consistently.

3.4 The Teaching and Evaluation Methodology

The last aspect that needs to be reconsidered has to do with our teaching and evaluation methodology of soft skills. As I mentioned before, it is a mistake to assume that it is enough for students to know the meaning of a soft skill then hope that this knowledge will straight away translate into an attitude or behaviour. Yet this is only half of the story, the main problem at times is that we do not teach students soft skills or we simply teach them about soft skills. We do not test soft skills as evidenced by acquired behaviour and attitudes but simply as declarative knowledge and superficial understanding of specific vocabulary items. Do we train students to become good public speakers, or do we just teach them the qualities of a good public speaker and we bombard them with tips on how to become one? These are two distinct questions; because when you look at it closely you notice that we oftentimes teach students about soft skills –in the form of concepts theories and vocabulary- and we assume that the rest will take care of itself. In other words, we hope that this knowledge will by some divine power translate into a life skill of some sort. This is exactly like teaching students a list of vocabulary items- or a list of grammatical rules of a given language - and hope that one day they will wake up and speak the target language fluently, which of course never happens

How we approach teaching soft skill needs, therefore, to be entirely revisited both in terms of instruction and evaluation. It is high time we stopped treating human skills as if they are technical knowledge or hard skills to be imparted to the students. In other words, we will never going to be possible to help students develop the life skills they need in the workplace if we keep treating soft skills as fixed knowledge or simply a list of concepts/values/or vocabulary items they need to learn and understand. Only with repeated practice in meaningful contexts, can those life skills be acquired and applied before they become natural behaviour and part of the learners' character. Evaluation of soft

skills must take the form of oral exams because students need to get used to sitting for interviews and handling different situations similar to those they will have to deal with when they are invited to sit for a job interview

To illustrate how soft skills are best measured and evaluated, teachers cannot, upon teaching students public speaking for example, have students write an essay about it; they have to stand up and speak facing a real audience? They have to jump to the water to sink or learn how to swim? Students cannot learn active listening for example without having them interact verbally and nonverbally in authentic conversations on a daily basis. It is true that knowledge is necessary but when it comes to values, human skills and attitudes, knowledge alone is never sufficient. Practice, repetition and hand on experience, together with knowledge, is what makes it possible for students to become skilled in whichever human, soft or life skill we want them to acquire and master. Engaging and involving students in an adequate learning environment and suitable situations that lend themselves to developing the life skills we want to acquire is a requisite.

CONCLUSION

Put in nutshell, it was the aim of this paper to show that soft skills can make or break future engineers. There is enough research evidence to believe that the lock step methodology (lecturing about soft skills) or teacher centred pedagogy or even a lexical approach (teaching concepts and vocabulary) will not help students acquire the necessary soft skills they need to make it in the workplace. It is not advisable to confuse teaching knowledge with teaching skills. We need to adopt the appropriate pedagogies that are likely to facilitate soft skills (skill-getting and skill-using) development in class in and beyond the classroom. We want the students to develop those essential life skills and not just know/learn about them. The second major aim of this paper was to clearly show that life skills are effortlessly learned when instructional strategies abandon approaches that are teacher centred and adopt a learner centred one. Examples of these approaches include cooperative or collaborative learning; problem based learning or project based learning and teaching through

coaching. Life skills are especially enhanced when hands on tasks and highly interactive and engaging teaching materials are devised for both instruction and evaluation purposes. These are very productive because they tend to immerse students in a learning environment where they gradually become life skilled individuals who can perform well and take the lead as proactive individuals in society. The classroom interactions, role plays and simulations generated by the students will give them a taste of what it feels like in their real life to get along well with those around them in the workplace. Being accustomed to working as a team member or leader would enable students to concretely experience the qualities it takes (i.e. active listener- commitment- empathy- initiative- and you name it) to collaborate with others to achieve common goals.

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