

The Evolution of Teaching Soft Skills in Higher Education (Innovative Education)

Abstract

While it is difficult to argue against soft-skill training in higher education, few if any colleges and universities formally integrate and assess soft skills in core course requirements. This paper explores the evolution of how colleges and universities have traditionally approached the subject of soft skills and current drivers dictating the necessity to integrate formal soft-skill training and assessment into cross-discipline core curricula.

Background

Colleges and universities continue to produce graduates with exemplary technical skills in their respective disciplines. Unfortunately, many of these graduates have a difficult time securing or retaining gainful employment. Apart from a tough job market, many graduates lack the appropriate soft-skill training that allows them to stand out from other job seekers and/or advance in a traditional workplace.

A 2013 Society for Human Resource Management survey of employers reported that college graduates lack basic applied skills including professionalism/work ethic, business acumen, written communication, relationship building, leadership, initiative, and problem solving (SHRM 2013). Soft-skills, interpersonal traits commonly referred to as human relations or people skills, are growing in importance in the workplace. The need for soft-skill training has become so important that the U.S. Department of Labor now provides soft-skill curriculum targeting youth and young adults. The curriculum focuses on six key areas including communication, attitude, teamwork, networking, problem solving/critical thinking, and professionalism (U.S. Dpt. of Labor).

While it is difficult to argue against the need for soft-skill training, the broader question is how academia arrived at this point. Historically, soft-skills were generally taught at home with

parents educating young children on basic manners such as please and thank you. As the children entered school, teamwork and conflict management were taught in the classroom, on the playground, and during unstructured interactions with siblings and neighbors. Elementary, junior high and high schools enforced key behaviors such as respect, courtesy, and personal responsibility. On that same note, K-12 teachers were stellar role models for these desired behaviors.

With the breakdown of the traditional family structure, a cultural push toward non-conformity, and the introduction of technologies, soft skills in the classroom took a back seat to an instructor's inability to discipline, larger class sizes, and standardized testing. By the time students reached higher education, a large majority of students were unaware of appropriate and acceptable behaviors as they were never taught these skills at home or in school.

Current Situation

Many of today's college professors continually struggle to have students perform basic tasks that in the past were mere expectations for a college student. These tasks include showing up to class, showing up on time, coming prepared, dressing appropriately, communicating professionally, paying attention, and respecting deadlines. Imagine how quickly an individual would lose his or her job if these behaviors were not demonstrated in the workplace. Elements of business protocol and professionalism are commonly included in management, organizational behavior, and communications courses but apart from these disciplines, key elements of soft-skill training are rarely integrated into core curriculum. As a result, students receive conflicting information on appropriate behavior because some professors themselves don't adhere to these expectations. In academia's quest to treat students as adults, many instructors do not require attendance and/or allow students to enter and exit the classroom in the middle of a lecture. It is also common to see students openly utilize personal mobile communication devices for non-class purposes. While the afore mentioned behaviors may be debatable for some, the boarder argument is that professors set the standard for what is and is not professional and acceptable behavior. Every college and university has professors who are lax in dressing appropriately, who fail to communicate professionally, and who do not hold students accountable for inappropriate

behavior. Although professors in certain disciplines will argue that soft skill training is not a necessity in select industries, employers in more contemporary industries such as technology would disagree. While dress codes may be more relaxed than a traditional workplace, hiring managers at successful technology companies such as Google seek graduates who excel in problem solving, teamwork, and communication (Woodward). For this reason, colleges and universities must utilize a cross-discipline approach to soft-skill training. Just as the concepts of ethics and technology are now fully integrated into every required course, so should be elements of professional behavior.

Preparing for Success

Institutions of higher education have an obligation to appropriately prepare students for professional success. By instituting a coordinated, cross-discipline approach to soft-skill training, graduates will be provided a competitive advantage in both their job search and professional careers. A coordinated, cross-discipline approach requires faculty understanding, faculty commitment, and a coordination of curriculum.

Faculty need to first recognize the importance and necessity of soft-skill training within his/her respective discipline. Professors that do not see a need for such training in their own area of expertise are challenged to consult with local industry professionals and hiring managers. In addition to technical skills, a great majority of these industry professionals will share specific soft-skills. In conversations with industry leaders, faculty should identify specific soft-skill sets, as emphasis varies by industry. Professors are also encouraged to take an introspective view of their own behaviors to identify shortcomings and areas where they excel in professional behavior.

After identifying industry-specific soft-skill requirements, professors need to make a commitment to provide students these necessary skills. A formal commitment involves identifying explicit activities students will be expected to perform both inside and outside of the classroom that teach and reinforce the desired behaviors. Upon discovering the desired soft-skills, most will note that the process of integrating soft-skills into the classroom requires a deviation from a traditional lecture. Therefore, the integration of soft-skill training will most

likely result in a change in the instructor's current pedagogy. Soft-skill training requires ongoing interactions with others. In the classroom, these interactions can be as basic as group projects, presentations, brainstorming sessions, and opportunities to create and problem solve as a team. While there will be an initial time investment in restructuring class meetings, the revised pedagogy will most likely reflect a more hands-on, practical learning experience for the student. This process will also most likely transform the classroom into an energized, lively environment for learning.

It is important to note that soft-skill training is easily integrated into course outcomes and should be routinely assessed through grading rubrics. Moreover, soft-skill training is equally as important in online instruction as to traditional face-to-face venues. In the process of integrating soft-skill training into course curriculum, instructors will become increasingly self-aware of their own behaviors.

When a faculty member formally infuses soft-skill training into his/her pedagogy, he or she will personally witness the benefits. This increased student engagement will most likely result in increased student retention and success. The faculty member will also have a better understanding of the need to teach these skills cross-curricula to ensure students are receiving consistent messages on the importance of professional behavior. Finally, students should be provided ample opportunities to interact with potential employers in an effort to develop their professionalism skills. An increasing number of colleges and universities are requiring students to perform internships and/or attend professional networking and advisory-sponsored events, all of which are perfect venues for students and faculty.

Professionalism is not always about wearing a business suit or shaking hands with executives. And it is certainly not about judging others by their lack of business etiquette. Professional behavior is an attitude that reflects consideration, courtesy, and respect. Professionalism and human relations are the skill sets that are in demand in today's workplace. College graduates need these skills and the only way these skills will be obtained is if appropriate behavior is modeled in a coordinated effort through their professors.

References:

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