Soft Skills: A Professional Wrangle

Abstract:

Both AACSB and the companies that hire our graduates want them to have soft skills.

But our teaching environment does not make it easy to teach these skills. Two problems:

1) How do you teach these soft skills?
2) How do you measure students' acquisition of them?

To give students the opportunity to practice these skills, some teachers step out of the limelight. What methods could be used and how can we assess soft skill learning?

How do innovators get support from colleagues, chairs, deans, and evaluation procedures?

We don't have all the answers; please bring yours!

Keywords: soft skill assessment, soft skill proficiency, soft skill instruction

Literature:

> *AACSB standards are useful but do not provide the concrete ideas about learning and teaching that faculty need to increase how much their students learn.*
> (Brown, Arbaugh, Hrivnak, and Kenworthy, 2013, p. 249)

According to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB-International) Accreditation Standards (2017) students wishing to pursue a degree in an AACSB accredited business school are expected to be taught in eight skill areas including: "written and oral communication, interpersonal relations and teamwork, and reflective thinking" (pp. 34-35). Further, within their general business knowledge areas, it is expected that students develop a competence associated with "ethical behavior and approaches to management" as well as group and individual behaviors in organizations and society" (p. 35). Additionally, the AACSB recommends that programs maintain "three critical success factors" including "Cultivate a position at the intersection of academia and practice" (p. 57). All of the above are related to concepts understood as professional or soft skills.

While there has been much discussion of what constitutes professional skills, there have been little to no conclusions as to: (1) What are the most important'; (2) How these skills might be taught in an academic setting; (3) How to fully assess the individual student's competencies within these specific skill areas upon the completion of a course or curriculum; (4) have efficient methods for instruction been revealed and (5) Are they implementable across different business specialties?

De La Harpe, Radloff, and Wyber (2000) recognize an array of professional skills previously identified in literature including communication, interpersonal competencies, teamwork, managing ambiguous situations, critical thinking, and problem solving, among others. Doyle (2017) provides a more comprehensive list in her writing and equates it closely to what are considered the most important qualities from the perspective of an employer. De La Harpe et al.

continue the discussion, stating that professional skills are rarely taught within targeted course or curriculum. Courses are typically focused on content knowledge (2000). This creates a situation that either professional skills are not taught or the method a course is taught may increase aspects of student's professional skills.

Fernández-Santander, García-García, Sáez-Pizarro, López, and José (2012) performed an analysis of professional skills throughout academic literature and classified results into a list of "key skills denomination" (pp. 32-34). Their table included an over-arching title and the oft-discussed components within it creating a conceptual overview for each skill. Their list of professional skills included adaptability, ethics, learning, problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork, application of knowledge, oral and written communication, decision-making, interpersonal skills, and creativity (Fernández-Santander et al. 2012).

Beyond recognizing that soft-skills are important and should be a requirement within curriculum, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, Inc. (ABET) first required "professional skills" as "Program educational objectives" in 2000 (2016). Further, professional skills comprise many accreditation standards including the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (2016) and the accreditation bodies for other industries.

Brink and Costigan (2015), in an analysis of oral communication skills throughout AACSB accredited business schools, suggests that most programs included learning goals associated with the professional skill of oral communication. Interestingly, they allude toward there being a misalignment between industry expected soft skill importance versus academic. Specifically, they suggest that it is difficult to assess many professional skill competencies, so academics may choose to asses only those they can do so competently (Brink & Costigan, 2015). Kilpatrick, Dean, and Kilpatrick (2008) further this point when discussing AACSB learning outcomes when they state:

> *We mean a focus on only that which can be seen to be immediately useful in a practical sense, over other, more uncertain, difficult to define, and ambiguous values.* (p. 203)

Hence, professional skills may be considered one of those items everyone states is important yet is unwilling to commit to evaluating due to the difficult nature of what or how to measure.

Bastalich, Behrend, and Bloomfield (2014) discuss that the development of skills associated with writing and communication are based in a constructivist nature because of the experiences students bring into the classroom. Their assertion correlates with the thought that skills are difficult to measure due the varied starting points students possess when they begin a course or curriculum or their academic careers.

Can it be how a course it taught?

A multitude of publications allude to the point that professional skills may be influenced or should be expected to be influenced through how a course is taught and whether it is student-centered versus instructor-centered (Baker and Henson, 2010; Boahin, and Hofman, 2014; De La Harpe et al., 2000; Francescato, Mebane, Porcelli, Attanasio, and Pulino, 2007; and Shuman, esterfield-Sacre, and McGourty, 2005). Those courses that are taught as student-centered naturally create situations where further peer interactions and decision-making occur. Francescato et al. (2007) contends that there is a continuum associated with the methods of instruction with little to collaboration on the low end to an immersive experience on the high end.

Continuing on De La Harpe et al's previous discussion, they assert that three things must occur in order for the practice of professional skills within the classroom (2000). First, the instructor must shift from just a subject purview to one that includes additional skill development. Second, the curriculum and how to include skill development should be planned and integrated. This item is important in the development of a more student-focused structure and De La Harpe et al. contend the atmosphere should be one similar to industry (2000). Third, the skills to be practiced should be assessed.

It is this third point that Brink & Costigan (2015) and Kilpatrick et al. (2008) claim is most problematic. There are no available standardized instruments that are able to delineate where on a spectrum one resides as it applies to specific professional skills. Hence, there is tremendous difficulty in appropriate assessment and understanding what a competent level might be.

The question whether what is the appropriate path forward remains. It is understood by most accrediting bodies that professional skills are important enough that they must be part of the curriculum (AACSB, 2017; ABET, 2016; ACEND, 2016). Further, it is recognized by many that professional skills are those that are developed in student-centered instruction (Baker and Henson, 2010; Boahin, and Hofman, 2014; De La Harpe et al., 2000; Francescato, Mebane, Porcelli, Attanasio, and Pulino, 2007; and Shuman, esterfield-Sacre, and McGourty, 2005). Finally, it is understood that there is tremendous difficulty in adequately assessing professional skills due to their ambiguity and acknowledgement that every individual's abilities reside on an undefined spectrum for each skill.

In closing, we would like to point out the barriers previously discussed are those that are prevalent within a community of practitioners that believe, overall, instruction should be student focused. Halpern and Hakel (2003) state the following:

> *We have found precious little evidence that content experts in the learning sciences actually apply the principles they teach in their own classrooms. Like virtually all college faculty, they teach the way they were taught. But, ironically (and embarrassingly), it would be difficult to design an educational model that is more at odds with the findings of current research about human cognition than the one being used today at most colleges and universities.* (p. 37-38)

Unfortunately, many of us work within a hierarchy where practices have been institutionalized and change occurs at a pace associated with how quickly academic peer's paradigms change. The questions then become centered around how does one change the institution itself. One starting point resides in defining specific skill outcomes to be practiced and to determine a method for assessing those specific skills.

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