

Making "soft skills" relevant in the eyes of the students: Co-creating solutions to bridge the gap

Abstract

"Soft skills" are undervalued by students, in particular business students. Whether this is due to a lack of perspective or direct application to school work and career goals, students approach "soft skills" as if they are common sense. While they might be common sense, they are not common practice. Through co-creation, this roundtable aims to generate implementable ideas for how to make this skill set more appealing and relevant to students. Our goal is to support one another in bridging this knowledge-practice gap to enhance learning in the classroom and beyond.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Emotional Intelligence, Leadership

Introduction

As academics, we have three major responsibilities: research, teaching, and service. Teaching can be the most rewarding and meaningful of these responsibilities, as it allows us to interact with and support students' development, at times, even translating research findings into applied suggestions to the students in class. Specifically in organizational behavior, the courses support students' development in so-called "soft skills." This term first originated in the U.S. military to indicate a difference between “important job-related skills that involve little or no interaction with machines” and “hard skills,” or the skills that do involve interaction with machines (U.S. Continental Army Command and U.S. Army Defense School, 1972). Although the report that created the term indicated (1) the importance of understanding and learning about “soft skills” for team effectiveness and performance, and (2) that no distinction should be made between “hard” and “soft skills” (U.S. Continental Army Command and U.S. Army Defense

School, 1972), the term and this dichotomy caught on and are still used. Unfortunately, over time, a connotation that “soft skills” are less legitimate and less necessary than “hard skills” (Parlami & Monnot, 2019) also developed, which increases the difficulty organizational behavior instructors have in exciting students to explore this relevant set of skills.

Given this dichotomy, in order to bridge the gap between reported research findings in this area, along with their practical applications, and learners’ interest and openness to learning about these skills, academics have used the media, publishing on major websites and newspapers, creating podcasts, and using social media as tools to highlight the importance of these organizational behavior skills. However, by itself, this practice does not address the problem of helping students’ interest in “soft skills” grow.

With that in mind, our roundtable discussion session in MOBTS seeks to provide an opportunity for participants to engage with each other in a lively discussion about how to make organizational behavior skills relevant in the eyes of the students, despite this dichotomy or preference toward “hard skills”. Our goal is that the discussion will support instructors and academics in developing better tools to aid students’ development in “soft skills,” which will, in turn, improve their achievements and impact students’ lives. As there is no one right answer to this question, we hope MOBTS members with diverse backgrounds, different teaching styles and experiences, and from different universities will join in to co-create ideas to bridge this difficulty. Together and in alignment with MOBTS’ current vision statement, we will work towards the common goal of enlightening organizational application with academic research, while focusing on enhancing learning in the classroom and beyond.

Theoretical Foundations and Teaching Implications

In recent decades, we can see an increased rate of non-traditional students in educational settings that, as a consequence, have different motivations, identities, and concerns (Jacqui & Becky, 2010). However, one suggestion that is not new is that differences in students' interest in course subjects are related to a plethora of positive teaching outcomes, from instructor effectiveness to curiosity and learning (Marsh & Cooper, 1981; Tobias, 1994). Research shows differences in learning styles, work preferences, and major choices for undergraduate degrees, based on generation, personality traits, sex, and age, with different generations presenting different values, and different sexes showing differing preferences toward more technical versus more relational majors (Ball, 2012; Chen et al., 2000; Twenge & Donnelly, 2016; Wey Smola & Sutton, 2002; Zafar, 2012).

As a result, an important challenge, especially in the organizational behavior field, is how to get students motivated and interested in learning “soft skills.” In business schools, with programs like finance, accounting, and strategy that rely heavily on hard, technical skills, organizational behavior courses can be seen as simply a required class students have to take versus an opportunity to gain a valuable skill. This perspective decreases student interest in the topic.

In this setting, the previously mentioned news from applied journals, or posts and podcasts that translate research findings, can be helpful in increasing students' interest, by making these skills more apparent and worthwhile. Movies and films also have been suggested as tools to increase the relevance of such skills (Bonner & Lamm, 2020). Research also has a variety of suggestions on how to increase the relevance of organizational behavior and leadership skills in the curriculum (Allen et al., 2021; Carden et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2021; Smith et

al., 2018), proposing that these “soft skills” can be called CORE skills, an acronym for Competence in Organizational and Relational Effectiveness (Parlami & Monnot, 2019).

In line with the practical and research-based recommendations, this roundtable discussion seeks to provide a space in which instructors can discuss and acknowledge this issue, while co-creating solutions that are not specific to a single course. By creating solutions that increase students’ interest in this skill set, our efforts will benefit students, their instructors, and their learning during and after their courses.

Session Description

This submission proposes a 60-minute roundtable discussion with the following timeline:

1. Welcome and Introduction: 10 minutes. The coordinators of the session will briefly introduce themselves, the topic, and current research findings that inform the discussion.
2. Breakout session: 3, 10-minute breakout discussions. Each participant will select to up to 3 breakouts in the following possible topics: 1. Curriculum, 2. Course content, 3. Course prep work, 4. In-class Lectures, 5. In-class activities, and 6. Course assignments. Each table will have access to a whiteboard and/or poster sheets, and be prompted to write and share any ideas or suggestions they have, from their own experiences, research suggestions, or other sessions in the conference. Each coordinator of this roundtable discussion will join a different topic, and the remaining tables will be asked to assign one of the participants to report their discussion and suggestions.
3. Sharing: 18 minutes, 3 for each topic described above. Each table topic will have 3 minutes to share their most relevant ideas and discussions with the entire group.

4. Conclusion and thank you: 2 minutes.

After the session, coordinators will collect and create a shared file that will incorporate all suggestions for each of the 6 topics. This will allow participants to keep the ideas in mind while designing and teaching their courses, as well as enable them to add any interesting new insights they have, even after the conference. We also intend to have a notetaker at the session, that can add to what participants shared at each table.

We believe that this roundtable will be valuable for participants, as they will discuss and co-create ideas to solve an important issue in organizational behavior teaching. As MOBTS members and organizational behavior instructors, participants will benefit from strategically and more systematically addressing this issue, while also incorporating resources available in other conference sessions.

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