Nothing Hard about Soft Skills in the College Classroom

Jacqueline Waggoner, Ed.D.  
Assistant Professor  
School of Education  
University of Portland  
5000 N. Willamette Boulevard  
Portland, Oregon 97203-5798  
waggoner@up.edu  
503-943-8012

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Abstract

Soft skills are defined, and reasons for teaching them in colleges are discussed in light of adult transformative and brain-based learning theories. Strategies for teaching soft skills are also presented.

Soft skills are discussed extensively in workforce literature as even more important than cognitive and technical/content area skills necessary for employee success. These skills include listening, problem solving, ethics, teamwork, caring, responsibility, personal habits, and conflict resolution. In order to teach the whole person, professors are encouraged to teach soft skills explicitly.
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Soft Skills

Soft skills have been defined a number of ways in the workforce literature. There is even some criticism of using the term, soft skills, as it may suggest the skills are “kind of fluffy, and they’re not really as important, and they’re kind of just a nice little add-on” (Schick, 2000 p. 25). Soft skills encompass a range of interpersonal skills such as courtesy, respect for others, work ethic, teamwork, self-discipline and self-confidence, conformity to norms, language proficiency, and behavior and communication skills (Career directions, 2003; Career Opportunities News, 2002). These skills comprise a cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism which individuals acquire as they grow and mature. Other soft skills are active listening, negotiating, conflict resolution, problem solving, reflection, critical thinking, ethics, and leadership skills (Dash, 2001; Gorman, 2000; Isaacs, 1998; Schulz, 1998). In teacher education, the soft skills of social justice, caring, responsibility, and fairness are called dispositions and are part of the triad of knowledge, skills, and dispositions competent teacher education candidates should demonstrate according to the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2001).

Changes in College Students

The changes in college classrooms have occurred for a variety of reasons. There are a larger percentage of older students who could be called nontraditional students, mature students, or adult learners. Thirty years ago university classrooms were filled with students who were predominantly white and under the age of 25. Now, the age-25-and-older student accounts for
about a third of the students, and approximately 28 percent of students are of color. This trend is only growing stronger with demands for retraining in a fluid work environment (Anderson, 2003). Political, economic, and societal changes, as well as the changes in gender attitudes have coincided with an increase in women, minorities, and individuals with lower socioeconomic status attending college in greater numbers (Ogren, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education reported that almost 75 percent of undergraduates can be considered nontraditional as a result of their age, financial status, or when they enrolled in college (Evelyn, 2002). Today’s students are motivated to pursue knowledge and skills useful in their life roles while maintaining a sense of self-esteem and pleasure (Boulmetis, 1999). This trend is being reflected campus wide.

The society in which these students have lived has also changed over the last 25 years. There are more college students who have experienced alcohol and/or drug abuse, domestic violence, mental health issues (i.e. anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, personality disorder) or have family members who have experienced those problems. A Kansas State University study of counseling center client problems of 13,000 students over a 13-year time period found students who had been seen in the more recent years presented with more complex problems. The problems included the more traditional issues of college students, such as relationship difficulties and developmental struggles, as well as the more serious diagnoses of personality disorders, depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and sexual assault. In fact, the number of students diagnosed with depression had doubled over the 13-year time period of the study, the number of students with reporting suicidal ideation had tripled, and sexual assault-related issues had quadrupled (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, Benton, 2003). Additionally, the current upsurge in the prevalence and abuse of methamphetamines in many communities is touching the lives of students and their families and adds additional stressors to adults attending higher
education. The results of all of these societal issues have been changes in methods and curriculum from what was used previously with 18 to 22 year olds and a discussion of the importance of students demonstrating soft skill competencies in the college classroom along with competencies in the core curriculum (hard skills).

At the 2005 Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education, professors discussed issues associated with today’s adult learners. The consensus was that the days are gone when most every student comes to class on time, without cell phones (turned on), and without beverages and/or food. Some instructors reported students bringing their infants or older children to class, and everyone had heard the ring of a cell phone at least once while teaching. This sometimes was followed by the student answering the call and engaging in conversation or walking out of the class talking while the class was in session. Accompanying these changes was the presence of some students who could be described as “more demanding, combative, emotional, outspoken, and less respectful.” It was stated that students see themselves as consumers buying a product in the higher education setting. They want their money’s worth, and they are willing to lodge a consumer complaint if the service or “goods” do not meet their expectations or are perceived to be of poor value for their money. Those teaching in private institutions said it is common for students to remind the professors how much money they are spending pursuing their degree.

Today’s students enter classrooms asking, “What is the reason I should learn this? What will I get out of this class, besides earning three semester hours and fulfilling a graduation requirement?” Students bristle if they perceive assignments are busy work, and they want authentic assignments directly related to their career goal. The professors at the conference commented that students want to be shown respect for what they bring to the classroom; and
instructors are expected to know the needs of their students, make class pleasurable while minimizing threat, deal with possibly fragile or inflated egos, and understand students have a life outside of their college classroom that could interfere with deadlines stipulated in the syllabus. In fact, most said it was common for at least one student each semester to announce to the instructor (not ask) that he or she would be missing a class, and an accommodation for the student’s conflict in schedule was expected from the professor.

The professors also said some adults bring emotional baggage from their childhood and adolescent years along with their textbooks. It is not uncommon for class members to share they are recovering from some form of substance abuse or that they come from a family where there has been generational poverty, child abuse, single-parent households, domestic violence, hospitalization of a family member for a mental health issue, or incarceration of a family member. In fact, some college campuses are now dedicating housing, sometimes called “Recovery Dorms,” to support individuals’ recovery (CNN, 2005).

With instructional formats changing from primarily lectures to more active student participation, individuals with emotional baggage have a variety of opportunities to reveal their personal issues during class. Today’s college classrooms may have students who are not a delight to be around, are impulsive, insensitive, or appear to have an inability to delay gratification of having their needs met. Other students appear to have an authority problem, a chip on their shoulder, struggle with teamwork, or have difficulty managing their moods; and they are less interested in conforming to prevailing norms of dress or behavior. These students may exhibit communication deficiencies in terms of voice tones, choice of words, use of profanity, choice of topics to discuss openly in class, and in how much to talk; they may be less flexible and struggle with diversity and compromising for the common good in the classroom. A
third group may exhibit excuse-making, avoidant behaviors, and seldom complete work in a timely manner. They tend to be off-task and unprepared. While the aforementioned behaviors are not necessarily new to college classrooms, it is now more common to have them demonstrated by more students, more frequently, and more intensely.

The professors at the AILACTE conference workshop were caring individuals from a variety of disciplines who expressed a desire to be good teachers and learn strategies that would improve their students’ acquisition of knowledge. They truly were interested in professional growth and were eager to learn what they could do to address the needs of their changing population of students. The instructors were aware that they needed to adapt their classroom environments to accommodate the savvy and more vocal consumers of education and the adults who demonstrate difficult behaviors. They were searching for more tools to add to their repertoire of excellent teaching strategies already being used with their adult learners.

*Adult Learners*

Adult learners bring specific, defined characteristics to the university learning environment. Although the aging process can increase the vulnerability of brain connections, it also has the potential to assist the growth of neural networks, resulting in the adult brain becoming more responsive to absorbing information and new learning. The challenge is to maximize that growth of neural networks by teaching in a way that is compatible with adult learning theory. Over 30 years ago, Malcolm Knowles (1970, 1980) wrote one of the pioneering books addressing characteristics of adult learners. The andragogical model of Knowles referenced adults’ needs for a suitable physical and psychological climate and elements of self-
directed learning. Since then, a body of literature has developed addressing adult transformative learning by which adults’ frames of reference become transformed to more reflective, inclusive and discriminating frames of reference from their previous perspectives and mind-sets. Adult transformative learning theory (Clark, 1993; Dirkx, 1998; Elias, 2000) and brain-based learning theory (Reardon, 1998-1999; Weiss, 2000) have provided guidance for teaching adults in ways that maximize their learning potential, recognize the unique characteristics adults bring to a learning community, and minimize behaviors that can be detrimental to the learning environment. Learning involves the creation of neural networks and synapses (Fishback, 1998-1999), and brain plasticity, which enables the brain to be molded and reshaped, continues throughout one’s lifetime (Zull, 2004).

*Lack of Soft Skills*

The question is what to do when professors perceive a lack of soft skills in students in their classes. After all, aren’t professors to teach the specialized knowledge honed in their doctoral programs? When did it enter a professor’s job description to teach students fundamental courtesy, social graces, and collegiality while teaching the hard skills of inferential statistics? It is postulated by this author that professors need to address soft skills as well as hard skills in today’s classrooms, and soft skills need to be taught by methods consistent with adult and brain learning theories. Instructors are teaching students statistical analysis; not teaching statistical analysis to students. The order of the words makes a fine distinction and recognizes that in order to teach hard skills effectively, professors also have to teach soft skills. Human resource directors recognize it is as important to hire individuals who “fit” the organization as well as those who have the cognitive ability and technical skills for the job. Organizations shy away from the cookie-cutter clones who do not distinguish themselves with their sense of humor, likeability,
and flexibility. Teaching soft skills with the hard skills recognizes that professors are teaching the whole person and that the acquisition of soft skills is just as important to an individual’s success as the hard skill content. In fact, a lack of soft skills is more likely to get an individual’s employment terminated than a lack of cognitive or technological skills (Lawrence, 1998). The Stanford Research Institute and Carnegie Mellon Foundation reported 75 percent of long-term job success depends on interpersonal or soft skills, and only 25 percent of success is attributed to technical knowledge (Behm, 2003).

*Which Soft Skills?*

The soft skills upon which one focuses will be brought to the class as gifts from the students. They are easily identified in that first awkward moment when a student says something others perceive as rude, or when the same person has interrupted class for the fourth time. The skill deficit may also become apparent when it is noticed students are not listening to each other, the same question that was just answered is asked again, or when a cooperative learning strategy fails due to students being uncooperative.

Some of the more common and essential soft skills that can be taught in college classrooms concurrently with the course content (hard skills) are ethics, respect, listening, problem solving, teamwork, flexibility, and courtesy. Corporate scandals have brought to light the continued need to address ethics in all of our classrooms (Bunker & Wakefield, 2004), and the literature on the ideal employee frequently mentions the importance of the individuals who are respectful, flexible, courteous, and are good listeners and effective problem solvers (Dash, 2001; Gorman, 2000; Isaacs, 1998; Schulz, 1998).

*Teaching Soft Skills*
It has been argued that soft skills or dispositions are acquired through inculcation, are developed early in life, and are difficult to excise and replace with others. Therefore, it can be seen as misguided and too late to transmit and assess them with adults (McKnight, 2004). Given the encouraging literature on adult and brain-based learning, however, there is a belief by others that adults can improve their soft skills as part of their lifelong learning journey if there is a classroom community that fosters such growth. Adult transformational learning theory is based on the concept of lifelong learning (and is consistent with brain plasticity), and purports adults are capable of changing the way they see themselves and their world (Clark, 1993). The business world is so convinced that adults are capable of improving their soft skills that there is a whole consultation industry devoted to improving soft skills of engineers, informational security majors, IT specialists, health care providers, and others in a variety of fields. There is even a coalition of business organizations and state leaders who are members of the Equipped for the Future Work Readiness Credential Project that is suggesting creation of a uniform certificate or credential that would be recognized in several states attesting to an individual’s mastery of certain soft skills (Cavenagh, 2005).

Since teaching soft skills explicitly and concurrently with hard skills is new to include in course syllabi, some direction on how to proceed is needed. As with other course content, instructors can begin by discussing the relevancy of consistent demonstration of soft skills in different settings. Students can generate examples of soft skills, describe how a particular skill is manifested behaviorally, and give examples of instances when a lack of soft skills created problems. Include soft skills with the other course content in the syllabus, and specify what learned outcomes will be evaluated. In fact, one can give students self-scoring, soft skills beginning and ending inventories. These assessments can be used to measure an individual’s
growth in soft skills from the beginning to the end of the semester. At the least, the assessments will be a visual reminder for students of the desired soft skill competencies. Additionally, the instructor can take care to model soft skills and give consistent, specific reinforcement for positive demonstrations of soft skills. Mezirow (1991) suggests beginning the transformative process with a “disorienting dilemma” (p. 168) which leads to reflection and reevaluation of assumptions individuals possess upon entry to the course. Students are led to experience cognitive dissonance, which is a psychological phenomenon describing the discomfort felt when there is a discrepancy between what an individual knows or believes and new information (O’Keefe, 1990). This discomfort leads to productive discussion of one’s new perspective. Students can be encouraged to monitor their thinking and engage in metacognition (ability of one to control one’s own cognitive processing) by actively processing what they have learned, how they learned it, and reflecting and analyzing interpersonal issues (Waggoner & Wollert, 2005).

Role plays can be used to add authenticity using discipline-specific issues. It is possible to have fun with these role plays, as the instructor and students become more comfortable throughout the term giving each other feedback in a caring manner. An important consideration is to continue teaching and reinforcing soft skills throughout the course. If the professor drops emphasis on soft skills, students also will slack. Involving the students in developing a culture where these skills are as important to practice as the other course content will help students internalize the skills. Professors can ask students to “please rephrase” verbalizations if they are perceived as less than courteous and should address veiled aggressive comments made in a “joking” manner. Another valuable tool is the “pre correction,” in which the professor begins class with a reminder about cell phone courtesy and respectful class interactions.
It is acknowledged that a class will consist of a variety of individuals with different soft skills and strengths and problematic behaviors and needs. As with other course content, it will take creativity and planned interventions to meet the needs of all students when teaching soft skills. It may be necessary to approximate the acquisition of the soft skill until individuals demonstrate it to the desired degree and to provide frequent and adequate opportunities to practice demonstration of soft skills. Incorporating other adult and brain-based learning theory in teaching soft skills is productive in reaching the nontraditional student. It helps to keep in mind the primacy-recency effect in the acquisition of knowledge. Individuals remember best what is presented first; remember second best what is presented last; remember least what comes just past middle, and the average attention span of adults is about a 20-minute block of time (Waggoner & Wollert, 2005).

The importance of students experiencing psychological and physical comfort in the classroom, and in making connections of the content to practical and familiar applications cannot be overemphasized (Waggoner & Wollert, 2005). Acknowledging needs in soft skills can be uncomfortable and lead to cognitive dissonance, so the classroom environment needs to feel safe. Soft skill instruction can be an excellent time to incorporate movement into the lesson and to provide an academically-based break from teaching a hard skill such as calculating an analysis of variance. Students’ concentration on hard skill material is enhanced by periodic movement and academically-based breaks that focus on soft skills. These breaks are similar to walking a bit after jogging at a fast pace for an extended time period. The collaborative environment built during soft skill acquisition will improve the classroom climate and lead to learning readiness.

Cautionary Note
There are some issues that students need to address through professional counseling and possibly medication. Individuals who display major depressive disorders, suicidal ideation, bipolar disorder, and other serious mental health issues need to be referred to the university’s counseling center for additional services. It is important that professors make appropriate referrals for the safety and security of troubled individuals. When in doubt, it is best to error on the side of safety, and to make a referral according to the university’s policies and procedures.

**Summary**

Given the changes in society and in the behaviors of today’s college student, it is necessary to teach soft skills to help them be successful upon graduation. Faculty will find that classes are more enjoyable for everyone when there is a climate of courtesy and respect, and students will acquire or refine those skills that have been identified as key factors to an individual’s future success when he or she leaves the world of academia (Behm, 2003). Rather than lamenting the changes seen in some of today’s college students, professors can welcome the challenge to teach the whole student and assist in the adult student’s transformative learning. It can add enjoyment and enhance learning in any curriculum to take an academic break from students calculating a correlation coefficient individually to working in teams to determine which test of significance is appropriate for the analyzing the data at hand. Hard times demand soft skills, and universities can help with the acquisition of soft skills by embedding them in course curriculum and explicitly addressing them throughout each semester.
References


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