

MANAGEMENT OF COLLEGE CURRICULUM THROUGH SOFT SKILLS: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

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Abstract

Change has always been the only constant. As Tennyson said a long while ago, that the old order changes to yield place to new, otherwise one good custom corrupts the world. The hitherto sacrosanct higher education system calls for a rethinking, redesigning and change, with the challenges being thrown up especially by the employment-generators. If we want our Management, Commerce or even our Engineering and Humanities graduates to be employable and to be well-adjusted in the fast-changing socio/emotional/economic/real-virtual globalised world, then the college teaching-learning process calls for a change across all disciplines. This becomes especially true for a country like India, which wishes to reap its demographic dividend, to gain international ascendancy.

The paper begins by defining and outlining the new-age socio-emotional competencies or soft skills or global employment competencies, as these core skills are being called. The paper then dwells on the problems of student disaffection from and boredom with the existing college classroom system. There is also the need of social inclusion of the 'disadvantaged' students. All of the above factors suggest the pressing need for classroom re-orientation.

With these factors in mind, the writer explores the responsible role that the teaching community needs to play. While working within the framework of university curricula, teachers need to become creative, driven and passionate within classroom. The active-learning approach can be adopted and adapted by teachers as per their subject requirements. This is a game-like approach which is student-centric and gives a sense of agency to students.

The paper goes on to suggest some activities within the paradigm of the active learning approach. It also gives evidence of an English class. The paper winds up by suggesting the need for a mixed format for student assessment, once this approach is practised and adopted in the classrooms. Assessment criteria for this kind of teaching-learning process is still at a nascent stage and calls for a lot of scientific testing by practitioners.

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Introduction

To be able to improve one's 'life chances' (Bromfield, 2011) has always been the purpose of education and learning. A sound knowledge base and vocational skills have always been important, but in the era of globalisation, newer challenges have been thrown up for educationists, policy-makers and learners alike. The focus now is on 'life skills' to improve one's 'life chances'. The purpose of learning has broadened to make learners "effective actors in their environment" (Deborah Loewenberg Ball and McDiarmid). Students now need both cognitive and non-cognitive skills as tools to gain control over everyday real problems.

For example, a student of engineering may be intellectually accomplished, or a historian might be able to memorise and rattle off historical facts and events, but if they lack the set of non-cognitive persistence skills, they may ruin their chances in life. "Resiliency and grit, along with the ability to communicate and advocate, are all crucial life skills (Caralee J. Adams). To learn the ability to solve problems and be resourceful, students must have developed their softer, non-cognitive skills. They are as vital as mastering Mathematics and learning how to read. Students need to learn responsible behaviour and self-regulation to take on challenging life-roles.

Core skills and attributes

Contextual variations apart, it is not difficult to identify some core skills and abilities that cut across individuals and cultures worldwide and lead to success in life. This success relates to our adaptive ability-- be it a workplace environment, family responsibilities or adjusting to a social set-up. These skills come under the rubric of soft skills and comprise intra- and inter-personal skills (socio-emotional competencies) such as communication and team-work.

Skills may or may not be inherent, but are cultivable traits. They demonstrate personal traits in given motivational situations. This leads one to believe that experience and practise can help cultivate required socio-emotional competencies. Sociologists and anthropologists also believe that socialization is a lifelong process of acquiring those skills which make people functioning members of society. Social institutions like the family, community and school – all are platforms for inculcating these non-cognitive competencies. By the time students join college, a large part of the socialization process has taken place, yet it is not complete. Further reinforcement of these skills is essential for employability. Hence they can and must be carried on within college campuses and classrooms through alert, aware, passionate, planned and purposeful teaching and

activities. In other words, one can say that the institutions of higher learning have to work within the paradigm of a 'teaching-learning community'.

Kechagias defines soft skills as "...intra- and inter-personal (socio-emotional) skills, essential for personal development, social participation and workplace success. They include skills such as communication, ability to work on multidisciplinary teams, adaptability, etc. He goes on to distinguish them from technical or "hard skills". "We characterize them as 'skills' in order to emphasize the fact that they can be learned/developed by suitable training efforts and they can also be combined towards the achievement of complex outcomes."

Soft skills could broadly comprise the following sets:

- **PEOPLE SKILLS:** Communication, inter-personal teamwork.
- **THINKING SKILLS:** Collecting and organizing information, problem-solving, planning, learning to learn, decision-making, innovative and creative thinking
- **PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES:** Responsibility and resourcefulness, flexibility, time management, self-esteem

Ellen Weber points out that boredom, passivity and disengagement in class is a common problem of students. This is especially so among students who lack confidence, feel disadvantaged and thereby disaffected from the classroom/education. This results in attendance shortfall, failure of desired learning outcomes, and overall "educational wastage" in the higher education system. It is very important to bring these students back to the classroom not only physically, but also mentally, socially and emotionally. Weber suggests "linchpin frameworks" that "help learners to lock in ideas, as axles keep wheels from slipping off essential tracks."

Social and Emotional Components

The time, therefore, has come to add social and emotional components to the time-honoured academic component in the classroom. Learning outcomes cannot be achieved if many of our learners always face the fear of social marginalisation. It is medically proven that the brain functions better under emotional well-being. Emotional skills act as important drivers of attention, thinking, learning, memory and understanding. It is, therefore, important, that students experience a supportive and positive relationship with teachers and peers and are given opportunities of academic engagement and motivation. Jacqueline Waggoner suggests, "The collaborative environment built during soft-skill acquisition will improve the classroom climate and lead to learning readiness."

A big challenge is in store for us, the teaching community. We need to understand that we are likely to become redundant if we continue to be ‘a sage on the stage.’ A teacher now has to be ‘a mentor in the centre.’ Teachers have to take on the roles of facilitator for the major part of the classroom time and aid students’ active learning. Some educationists have gone to the extent of suggesting the concept of the ‘mute’ teacher, where students are allowed to do most of the talking. One thing, however, becomes clear. The teacher cannot remain a disseminator of facts – s/he has to be self-motivated enough to become an innovator and a passionate and purposeful planner to engage more voices in the classroom, other than his/her own. Pedagogical strategies have to be creatively designed for all disciplines.

This is where active learning comes in, which is another name for interactive classroom time in which the teacher is an effective observer and allows learners to take centre-stage through self-direction and through peer-group efforts. Learning important subject knowledge and skill is quite comparable to acquiring a physical skill e.g. playing football, or acquiring a social skill like communication. Hermin and Toth opine that

Many individuals learn best and become proficient in skills by practising them rather than merely being a spectator to the skill, such as listening to teachers talk about the skill, reading about the skill, or watching others perform the skill.

To incorporate active teaching strategies successfully, a few steps need attention: the classroom structure, redesign of techniques and the procedures that they frequently take students out of their books, out of their seats and out of their moulds of habitual thinking. The crux is that teacher-guided instructional tasks or assignments should make students active participants in their own learning.

This should not lead one to assume that the teacher’s role has diminished. It takes on newer dimensions. Teachers need to innovate qualitatively, quantitatively and persistently, and to devise methods that provide students with opportunities for contributing to and participating in classroom transactions, so that they feel involved and hence, valued. When students begin to get a feeling of ‘agency’ through participation, they feel self-motivated. This can become the germination ground for the soft-skills inculcation.

The solution is not simple. Most teachers point to the pressure of ‘syllabus deadlines’ under which they function, and the need for catering to the ‘examination format’. Other teachers may

feel the fear of losing classroom control. The teacher has to be a creative designer or a deft integrator. S/he has to improve her own effectiveness by integrating student-centred activities, while never losing sight of the university curricular requirements. Durlak et al (2011) have used the acronym SAFE (Sequenced, Active, Focused and Explicit) for this kind of classroom management. Faust and Paulson are of the view that

Some of the criticism and hesitation concerning active and cooperative learning seems to originate in the belief that these techniques are intended to be alternatives to, rather than enhancements of lectures...”

They suggest using active learning techniques to “supplement” rather than “replace” lectures, and further add, “We believe that the lecture is a very efficient way to present information, but that using lecture as the sole mode of instruction presents problems for both the instructor and the students.”

Re-orienting the Classroom

Let us now look at some of the ways in which classroom management can be re-oriented. The first thing that comes to mind is that it would do well if the ‘chapel-like’ setting of classrooms could give way to the ‘banquet-style’ of furniture arrangement. Then there is no backbencher or front-bencher, per se. All students are on the same socio-emotional plane. The teacher is not on a fixed ‘front’ location but moves freely between the isles of round tables. Since active learning is all about students’ active (rather than passive) academic engagement, re-conceptualising interiors for new classrooms would be worth an effort.

Further, active teaching strategies and learning activities can be effectively used in classrooms across disciplines. All instruction should be guided by and focused on learning objectives. In the soft-skills approach, the targets for both the students and the teachers are:

- Teaching and learning of subject curriculum knowledge.
- Social inclusion of ‘disadvantaged’ students.
- Practice of global employability (soft) competencies/skills.

To rephrase it in Lucas’s words, “Active learning is a simulation or game approach which has four distinctive features 1) A search for meaningful understanding, 2) a focus on student responsibility, 3) a concern with skill as well as knowledge and 4) an approach to curriculum which leads beyond graduation to a wider career and social setting.”

Activities can be classified as single/group team activities and an ascending order of rigor can be incorporated into the activities from the start of the semester till the end. Wandberg and Rohwer (2010) suggest that the following could become a useful paradigm for the range of activities:

- Level 1: Point, underline, circle, locate.
- Level 2: Change, explain, draw, describe.
- Level 3: Apply, solve, show, construct.
- Level 4: Invent, produce, judge, defend.

They further write that the level of student independence can be further placed into four stages of increasing individual autonomy:

- Whole class, teacher led
- Small group, teacher assisted
- Partners, peer-assisted
- Independence, student autonomy.

While keeping the above-mentioned paradigms in mind, the soft-skills inculcation can proceed as per the following format, in consonance with the desired skill:

Organization Skills: These include managing assignments by gathering information and organizing ideas while keeping timelines in mind. The assignment then leads to presentation of work.

Strategies: The teacher can give students (as individuals or as groups) rubric (preferably curriculum-based) and also checklists, subtitles, etc. The teacher should demonstrate to students how to highlight important information or take meaningful notes. This can be given either as an on-the-spot activity or as a home exercise. The teacher should be strict with deadlines to help students inculcate time management skills.

Communication Skills: It may not be an exaggeration to say that half the battle in acquiring global workplace competencies is won by imbibing good communication skills viz. listening, reading, writing and speaking, in addition to the non-verbal skills of appropriate manners, behaviour, body language, etc.

Strategies: Listening skill can be acquired through teacher's lecture/presentation. The practice of repeated speak-stop-ask-speak again, several times during the lecture can ensure that students listen attentively. For reading skill, students can be given reading passages for comprehension with a fixed time-limit and asked to summarize what they

have read. Creating opportunities for role-play, power-point presentation or poster presentations makes students confident of their oral, written and technical skills. As for manners and body language, there can be no better demonstration or mode of teaching other than the teacher herself as role model. If the teacher keeps her own mobile phone on silent mode in the classroom, she will never have a problem while suggesting to students, “could you please keep your phones switched off while in the classroom?” Little graces like appropriate workplace attire, gait, gestures and frequent use of ‘thank you’ and ‘sorry’ go a long way in making a teacher a role model of good manners.

Thinking Skills: These comprise application of previous knowledge through significant use of memory and rationale, creative thought process, inquisitive disposition and posing questions, problem-solving and decision-making.

Strategies: Strategies for improving thinking skills include presenting case-studies of problem-solvers, creating fictional business/real life situations with a dead-end and then asking students to offer decisive solutions, inviting students to interpret diagrams/statistical information, graphs, etc. and give reasons for their interpretation. Teachers can also encourage students to think over and make systematic well-designed presentations on universal problems like those of pollution/ poverty/ violence/ gender inequality, etc.

Collaboration (or people) Skills: These comprise the ability to work within the dynamics of a group, to be flexible and have an accepting approach towards others, to share information and expertise, to be helpful, to have the ability to lead a team, to be patient and to have conflict-resolving skill.

Strategies: First, the teacher groups students or allows them self-grouping to carry out team-assignments. Then group tasks are allotted where each member collaborates fully. The teacher keeps assessment criteria that can reveal each member’s individual contribution. Team work is encouraged so that ‘brighter’ students can help the ‘weaker’ students, and competitive inter-group spirit is fostered. The teacher advises groups to explore the core strength of each member and make the best use of it to excel group effort.

Wandberg and Rohwer (2010) advise a word of caution:

Teachers should be thoughtful when selecting active learning activities. Select only those that authenticate and support the lesson's learner objectives. Conversely, teachers should be careful not to select an active learning activity if the *active* part of the activity distracts from the *learning* part of the activity. For example, some competition or game activities may result in some students becoming distracted and, as a consequence focusing more on the competition rather than the intended learning.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Minnesota too has given some guidelines for planning active learning activities. It suggests that the following questions will help a teacher clarify her goals and to structure an active learning activity while planning it:

- What are your objectives for the activity?
- Who is interacting? Will students pair up with someone beside them? Or perhaps someone sitting behind/in front of them? Should they pair up with someone with a different background? Someone they don't know yet?
- When does the activity occur during the class? Beginning? Middle? End? How much time are you willing to spend on it?
- Will they turn in the responses or not? If they are asked to turn them in, should they put their names on them? Will you grade their responses or not?
- How will they share the paired work with the whole class? How will you share the feedback and insight you gain from their responses?
- If they are responding to a question you pose, how are you going to ensure that they leave with confidence in their understanding? Often, if the various student answers are not discussed without the instructor explicitly indicating which ones are "right", students become frustrated
- What preparation do you need to use the activity? What preparation do the students need in order to participate fully?

The following is a suggestion of sample activities that can be innovated/used across disciplines, as described by S Merkel (2007):

The Reading Quiz: The teacher frames questions based on expected length of answer. To begin with, these can be memory type, and gradually proceed to reasoning, logic type. The teacher could go the extra mile once or twice during the entire semester, to incorporate an audio-visual

element to the quiz. e.g. in Literature, to help students memorise 'who-said-to-whom' type questions, the dialogues of different speakers should be self-recorded by faculty, and then used.

- 1. Think-Pair-Share (Lyman 1981):** The teacher poses a question. Individuals are given a minute to reflect on and write brief responses. Students pair up with someone sitting near them and share their answers verbally for two to three minutes or even rewrite after discussing, in order to improve their own answer. The teacher collects the slips from some pairs and discusses the answers and even grades them.
- 2. Speak-Stop-Ask-Speak Again:** The teacher lectures in ten-minute slots and breaks to ask questions. This would help ensure students' attention, comprehension and participation. Some ideas could be repeated right there if they need further clarification. It may not be unrealistic to suggest two such in-between lecture breaks and one 'ask' session at the end of the lecture.
- 3. Finger/Card Method:** In a multiple-answer type/ objective-question type session, students are asked to put answers on an index card and flash the answer when asked. One-finger/two-finger answers can be given for true-false, yes-no questions.
- 4. Flash Card/ PPT Quiz:** The teacher prepares one/two line flash cards/slides which flash a definition or a concept. Students are expected to give the correct brief answer. eg Milton's *On His Blindness* is a 14- line poem with a fixed rhyme-scheme. What genre of poetry does it belong to? Or Milton's *Paradise Lost* belongs to the genre of ----- poetry. What is the two-word term for that geographical occurrence when the earth comes between the sun and the moon and forms a shadow on the moon?
- 5. Jigsaw:** Each member of a team is responsible for learning a piece of the whole topic/,. Then the team sits together to teach each other their portion, thereby fitting the pieces into a whole. During oral testing in the class, each team-member gives the answer for the portion assigned to him/her.
- 6. Fish bowl:** In this method, the teacher carries a bowl to the class, puts two or three questions to the students, asks them to write their answers on small chits of paper and leave them in the bowl before leaving the class.
- 7. Puzzles/Paradox:** Also called brain teasers, they can be framed on logical application of theoretical knowledge. Eg. If William Shakespeare wrote poetry only of the sonnet form, could he have written *Julius Caesar*? Why/why not?

8. **Debate:** Using controlled emotions as an aid to learning can be very useful. Students in groups are assigned a viewpoint on a topic. Then they prepare and defend their side. The topic may be given as a home task or as a classroom exercise, so that it fosters the spirit of discussion among group members. To begin with, topics of student interest can be chosen viz. 'compulsory classroom attendance norms should be removed in the college system' or 'examination system is an evil.'
9. **Role-Playing:** Practice in the classroom can be made enjoyable with subject specific role plays or by enacting real-life scenes. Students or even the teacher can act out historical moments, a 10-minute scene from a play or a drama (in the syllabus) or a real life business deal (telephonic/face-to-face). Students can also be asked to role play real-life friends' conflicts or conflicts with parents.
10. **Micro-Teaching (student-teaching episode):** This helps students develop communication, critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

A Sample English Classroom

Form students' groups in the class, each comprising 4 students. If the class comprises 30 students, form seven such groups. English faculty may call this unrealistic, because the usual size of English compulsory classes is 80+ students. But we do have composition groups. Another occasion when this method can be put to use is towards the end of the session, when those students falling short of attendance or of other university eligibility norms, are supposed to attend classes to fulfil the mandatory conditions.

The grouping parameters can be variable from time to time. Initially, the teacher can put one bright student with weak students, so that the brighter one can help others in their comprehension levels and thereby also acquire the ability to lead a team. But towards the end-semester, grouping parameters should be varied. The brighter students should form one group, so that intra-group competition helps them excel even further and the weaker students should now handle curricular skills independently.

I am taking a leaf out of the Panjab University BA Part 1 English Compulsory coursebook, *English at Work*:

Give the class the rubric 'A Magic Show'. The class works on it against the background of Stephen Leacock's prose essay *The Conjuror's Revenge*. Ask each group to write a paragraph of 150 words on 'A Magic Show'. Give a deadline of 15 minutes. In these 15 minutes, students

should ideally spend 10 minutes in discussing the points and in roughly jotting them down. As the teacher moves between the groups, s/he can watch whether every member of the group contributes at least one idea. If the teacher finds something amiss, she can even point it out. In the last 5 minutes, the group should organize the points into a paragraph form. At exactly 15 minutes, the teacher should tell the groups to stop writing. Now one group at a time should be invited to the front of the class and one member of each group should read out what the group has written. Allow 2 minutes of reading to each group, followed by 1 minute of question-answer by other groups to the presenting group. When all the groups have made their presentations, give another 2 minutes to the students to do peer assessment. Anybody who volunteers (maximum 2) may be asked to evaluate not only the performance, for content and presentation both, but also the pros/cons of this exercise.

The teacher now takes centre-stage. He/she can make some overall comments and observations and also help add to the content of the students' paragraphs. (Groups should also be encouraged to take points from each other). Given that the allotted period is of 45 minutes, the time for this exercise can be divided as follows:

- First announcement by teacher and class re-organization into groups: 5 minutes.
- Writing: 15 minutes.
- Presentation: 21 minutes.
- Peer Assessment: 02 minutes.
- Teacher's Observations: 02 minutes.

One can see that the bulk of the time in the above is towards students being in the active, rather than the passive mode. The above exercise (or improvements upon it) may be worth a try in the classroom. If one makes a step-by-step analysis of the skills that this kind of exercise can help develop, it would be something like this:

1. **Chapter recall (memory) skill:** A chapter prescribed in the course would be indirectly prepared. Along with this the question on paragraph-writing also gets attention.
2. **Team-Collaboration:** Students will naturally feel some inter-group competitive spirit and try to put their best effort for the team.
3. **Peer-learning:** Even those who fail to contribute towards the team effort will learn and almost revise a chapter in the exercise.
4. Writing and organizing skills:

5. Presenting skills:
6. **Self-assessment and peer-assessment skills:** When students listen to each group, they will understand where the other scored better and in which respect they themselves had an edge over the other.

Testing

Scientific testing of the success of the soft-skills approach is an area of ongoing research, some evidence is available.

One needs to assess on two parameters:

1. Evaluate the success of this integrated approach. This requires ground-testing and experience-sharing by the teaching community.
2. Assess individual student's success.

The overall evaluation of the programme can be made from factors such as:

1. Students' level of attendance during the programme.
2. Students' comments at the end or even midway through the programme.
3. Students' progression into employment and their social inclusion.

Students' assessment can be a mixed format comprising:

- A) Standard tests (multiple-choice-question type)
- B) Construction tasks (short answer/essays/products/presentations)

Just as a test of driving cannot be a written test or viva-voce only, it has to include practical demonstration of road-driving for assessment to be valid, so also, soft skills assessment cannot be theoretical or written only. Students may be judged on the following parameters:

Performance: To judge performance, the teacher-incharge can form a panel (from within and outside the institution) to take a short presentation from each student individually. Some templates/rubrics could be provided to students beforehand. If the student wishes to make a powerpoint presentation, the panel should focus as much on the product, as on the process. This would give evidence of genuine personal effort on the part of each examinee. Alternately, if the availability of number of computers permits, on-the-spot topics can be given to prepare 5-minute presentation.

Portfolio: Another parameter on which learners need to be judged, is preparing and presenting a personal profile- electronic or paper format, whichever way the student wishes to. Templates can be pre-assigned and can comprise academic skills, personal management skills, and teamwork

skills, etc. For this the panel of examiners should comprise two academics(one internal, one external) and one HR expert from the industry. As in performance assessment, the focus here should be on real skills, rather than those stated by the examinee in the portfolio.

Teacher Assessment: A lot of weightage should be given to the assessment by the teacher/s in-charge of the programme, and she should be a member of each examination panel. This is so because she has been a close observer of the change in every learner and can give a very holistic assessment of each student's progression.

Data Analysis: For scientific data-analysis of student progression/ programme evaluation, the teacher can perhaps administer a questionnaire to students before the start of the programme and the same at the end. For the sake of maintaining absolute objectivity and anonymity, each student can be assigned a personal identity number to be used in both the questionnaires. Some standard questionnaires like the LEQ-H questionnaires are available. Passionate and involved teachers and researchers can create/identify more such testing tools and share them with others.

The success of the programme would be a service to the youth, to society, to the nation and to overall world peace and progress.

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