



Infusing Online Courses with Opportunities for Interpersonal Skill Development

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Summary

Higher education professors and employers want assurance that graduates possess an operant knowledge base, as well as a core set of specific life skills that promote success in a global workplace. Such attributes include verbal and nonverbal communication skills, collaboration, socio/emotional intelligence, leadership, and conflict resolution, among others.

Professors are discovering ways to incorporate “soft” skill development in their courses. Many are designing effective face-to-face learning activities that can work equally well for classroom and online students. Adult learners with career experience benefit from new insights derived from theory-related experiential learning. Younger learners may undergo some internal transitions as they prepare to leave a buffered academic setting for a contemporary workplace characterized by unpredictable challenges and variety. “Foreign” cultures are found everywhere – at home and in other lands – and within corporations, vocational fields, and geographic regions. Successful interactions require tact, restraint, perceptiveness and adaptability.

This interactive session will examine ways to enable students to develop and demonstrate these key interpersonal competencies. Participants will be invited to discuss desirable student qualities from their unique perspectives, share their own creative strategies, and explore possibilities for future inter-institutional collaboration to foster both intercultural and interpersonal skills.

Introduction

While higher education traditionally prepares learners with the content knowledge and skills to successfully contribute to a workplace and society, more emphasis is needed to develop the ‘soft skills’ necessary for today’s dynamic global marketplace. Employers are seeking staff who demonstrate excellent written and oral communication, an inclusive interaction style, harmonious collaboration with others, an adaptive and reflective thinking process, and cultural sensitivity. A survey of employers of graduates at our university determined that the following ‘success factors’ are prized, in this order: verbal skills; teamwork; listening skills; problem solving; integrative thinking; global perspective; and persuasive ability (Park University, 2005). Such qualities are critical to the success of our learners, institutions of higher learning, business and industry, as well as the global society.

Preparing for Transition

Higher education is steeped in traditional values, norms, and approaches to educational enlightenment. Consequently, educators have relied heavily on teaching according to the ways in which they were taught – primarily with lecture, memorization, and testing. The *transmission model* (Wink, 2005) in which the teacher transmits knowledge and the student receives knowledge is aligned with what Friere (1972) labeled *educational banking*. In both instances, the environment lacks the opportunity for students to interact and advances the teacher as ‘holder’ of knowledge and power (Cervero & Wilson, 2001). Many educators have moved beyond the transmission model to embrace the *generative model* of teaching, in which students come together to engage actively in the learning process and produce their own learning (Wink, 2005). Accordingly, the role of the educator is to structure and guide the experience while allowing learners to develop meaning and understanding of the concepts. Examples of the *generative model* of teaching include cooperative learning, group activities and assignments, and a more ‘constructivist approach’ to learning, in which the student engages in social process to make information personally meaningful (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). A third approach to teaching, the *transformational model*, serves to generate knowledge that extends from classroom to community and highlights the role of the educator as facilitator of social change through experiential learning (Wink, 2005). In this model, the student creates meaningful knowledge from information that is relevant and applicable, in service-learning, study abroad programs, and the like. The transformational model ensures direct application of newly gained knowledge. It offers the potential for a paradigm shift or a change in perspective within participants – one that encourages critical thinking and reflection. Mezirow (1978) defines transformational learning as a “dramatic fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 318). Given the rapid pace at which our world is changing, it becomes critical that educators gaze beyond these traditional models and adapt, and to seek the next level of learner engagement and the skills and dispositions that will be required for an uncertain and dynamic future.

Needed Skills

The contemporary workplace is characterized by diversity, unpredictable challenges, personnel shifts, changing priorities, and other phenomena that can unravel the most capable and even-tempered employee. At times the urgency to “get the job done” may overwhelm the need to maintain effective working relationships. For this reason it is even more important that organizations employ persons who recognize the need for *esprit de corps* and effective social skills. Although some persons frequently display more or less of these skills, they are not innate. They can be learned and internalized through desire and purposeful application. In this paper we will explore some ways in which such skills can be integrated into a formal program of study.

The Educational Setting

Throughout a program of study the faculty should emphasize and explicate the characteristics, dispositions, skills, and outcomes expected of graduates. Courses should be designed so as to address interpersonal skills, through self-assessments, reading assignments, practice opportunities, feedback sessions, and summative evaluation. Thus learners can identify specific instances in which their skills served them well or fell short of meeting the challenge (Klann, 2006). Among the dispositions, attitudes, and ‘soft skills’ needed in the workplace, we are focusing on: active listening, social intelligence, self-awareness and control, empathy, collaboration, influence and persuasion, negotiation and conflict resolution, and flexibility.

In our Adult Education graduate program, which is offered online without any face to face interaction, we strive to prepare our learners for greater success in their careers. Most of our students are working adults, with substantial job experience. By graduation, they are required to master an operant knowledge base of theory, research and practice. We believe that in order for them to be maximally effective, they also must possess a core set of interpersonal skills aside from the subject matter. Thus we are devising and implementing a repertoire of structured learning activities to address 'soft' skill development. Each activity could be deployed in the traditional classroom as well as online.

Our curriculum is writing-intensive. Most assignments call for formal papers; but in the threaded discussions students are allowed a more informal tone. The discussion feature is ideal for sharing, analysis and reflection. For maximum success, we are enacting guidelines to assist students in meeting the requirements.

Guidelines for Skill Development Activities

Mindful of the well established adult learning theories which frame our curriculum, in adding this new focus on interpersonal skill development we enact the following core beliefs, as informed by Adams (2008) and Adams and Morgan (2007):

1. While the technology enables, the pedagogy/andragogy guides.
2. Students absorb and learn in multiple, diverse ways, and not necessarily in a linear fashion.
3. Situated learning is powerful, particularly when placed in a personally meaningful context.
4. Informal, loosely structured learning tasks may be more beneficial than controlled tasks.
5. Active engagement with ideas and other people produce greater self- and other-awareness than are achieved through passive activities.
6. In the accelerated 8-week course, short-term, intensive learning activities are appropriate.
7. Life-like scenarios, reflection, and self-assessment yield more growth and improvement than assessment or judgment by others.
8. Through self-monitoring, changing, and leading oneself, and validation by concerned others, a learner stands to gain valuable self-efficacy with respect to his/her potential to influence, lead, and work well with others.

Web-mediated courses pose both challenges and advantages to learners and faculty. While we lack the benefit of face-to-face interaction, we may distill different nuances from the written word than we detect when facing someone. Also, technology enables the capture and storage of multimedia material for repeated viewing at any time by geographically dispersed users. Thus the gains made by one learner can benefit all learners through sharing, debriefing, and participating in reciprocal feedback. Furthermore, with archived dialogues, chat sessions, and collaborative group editing opportunities, the online experience allows learners to participate in a deeper level of metacognitive reflection, with access to reflect upon their own entries throughout the course and throughout their program. In the following section we propose specific learning activities to improve the interpersonal skills of learners.

Activities for Developing Interpersonal Skills

In all instances the purpose of the assignment should be made clear, and in keeping with 'best practices' of adult education, learners should be given some choices whenever possible. One activity that has proven successful and enjoyable for our learners is the **semi-structured interview**. Students are informed that this activity can strengthen their interpersonal and reflection skills. They are to identify an adult educator in their community

who holds a graduate degree. Using prepared questions which they can adjust as necessary, the students conduct a one-hour interview and record it if possible. They write a reflective summary using detailed criteria from the interview grading rubric, and share it in group discussion. We consider how the students 'broke the ice', the extent to which interviewees were forthcoming, and how successfully the students summarized and concluded their exchange. Variations on this assignment might include instructor follow-up with the interviewees, or conducting it among the learners as a **role play**, with the instructor coaching each participant to provide some unexpected challenges.

A more challenging activity is the **simulated job interview**. Using a helpful colleague at work or a family member who has received a 'script', the learner must respond to such questions as: give an example of how you motivate and inspire others; how you assess other team members' strengths and weaknesses; how you mentor new associates at work; how you manage others' hostile emotions; and how you handle discord. Again, the interview is recorded if possible – video tape is preferred – and the learner privately reflects upon the performance. Our threaded discussion feature subsequently is used for students to present their findings and engage in constructive dialogue.

While students usually enjoy the interview assignments, they often are ambivalent about a **debate**. It is a simple matter to advocate for a position that one truly espouses; but it can be challenging to have to take the other side and provide convincing arguments. Yet *persuasion* is a critically important skill in the workplace. One variation on the debate might include adopting the persona of someone from an *individualistic* or *collectivist* culture (see Hofstede, 1980). Given the interconnected nature of today's world and marketplace, understanding and appreciating perspectives that differ from one's own is critical. Another option is to create a scenario which requires **bargaining and negotiating** for scarce resources.

Yet another alternative for facilitating interpersonal skill development among learners is through a **service learning or community outreach project** that takes place in their locale. Learning objectives should be delineated in advance, with interim reports required as well as a summative evaluation. If possible, a preceptor at the site can be involved in facilitating appropriate learning experiences and debriefing. If an actual project is not feasible, satisfactory results can be obtained through a carefully constructed **case study**. With cases, learners devise their own solutions to a detailed problem area, and compare notes in the threaded discussion. If given the proper guidelines and expectations, students also can create their own "case study" based upon personal experience, in which they share with the class and initiate discussion for 'real solutions' to their 'real dilemmas'. Regardless of the approach, the role of the faculty is to guide and moderate the discussion, proposing alternative views as necessary.

Among the finest resources for fostering self- and other-awareness are the **experiential learning exercises** supplied in *Joining Together – Group Theory and Group Skills* (10th ed.), a textbook used that provides exercises in which learners gain insight into their behaviors during tasks that require group decision making, for example. Here is a sample exercise, in which learners can gain insight into their behavior during a task involving group decision making. Students are assigned to conduct this pleasant exercise at home with family or with colleagues at work, and to describe their experiences in the threaded discussion.

The Bean Jar Exercise

This activity demonstrates how participants in a group affect one another and how group size can affect the quality of a decision. The exercise can be completed in 30 minutes

or less, and requires only a large jar containing a quantity of beans. The procedure for the facilitator is as follows:

1. Explain that the exercise focuses on decisions as made by different combinations of individuals. Then set a large jar of beans on the table in front of the participants. (You must know exactly how many beans are in the jar.) Inform the participants that they will be asked to estimate the number of beans the jar contains.
2. Have each person estimate the number of beans, working alone. Record the estimates.
3. Have each participant choose a partner. Have the pairs devise a system for estimating how many beans are in the jar, and record their estimates.
4. Have each pair select another twosome and have the new teams estimate the number of beans. Record their responses. Repeat this process enough times to allow everyone to participate.
5. Ask for the final estimates and then reveal the number of beans in the jar.
6. Have the group form clusters and discuss their experiences, how they felt during the decision making, and the way they operated in the groups. Finally, ask them to form a set of conclusions about the degree to which they influenced one another, and the effect than the number of members had on the quality of the decision. (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 314-315.)

Benefits of Group Learning

As John Donne (1572-1631) stated so eloquently, *No man is an island, entire of itself*. Learning is a social activity, and the gains usually are greater through interaction with others. In this section a variety of experiential learning activities have been presented, each with the potential to enhance interpersonal skills.

Conclusion

Working adults who pursue additional education need carefully designed programs of study that allow them to master the requisite knowledge in their fields as well as achieve interpersonal harmony, satisfaction and success. Faculty at institutions with international or cross-cultural students must become more attuned to the cultural dimensions of human interaction as they affect learning and preparation for taking one's place in a complex, global society. We hope that one avenue for continued focus on this important topic might be through inter-institutional collaboration that provides opportunities for contact among faculty and learners of different persuasions.

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