

Hard Skills Will Qualify You, with Soft Skills You'll Rank the First

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The aim of this paper is to address the urgent need of transforming university curriculum in the realm of interpersonal skills. The standard of university education in the Czech Republic is very high regarding knowledge, facts and hard skills in general. However, it does not at all correspond to the level of real-life skills, skills that embrace interacting with people, as demonstrated frequently by our students during their lessons. It addresses the issue of incorporating these, so called soft skills, into university curriculum, either as a compact course, as individual seminars or as individual activities introduced within regular coursework. The stance of the authors is, that such implementation is of utmost significance to all students, regardless of their field of study or level of education.

The definition of soft skills, as we see them, corresponds to the definition of Oxford dictionary and reads: soft skills are “personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people.” And as groups (both informal and formal) are becoming most relevant at workplaces, considerably more than individual people, this social harmony is considered requisite, since “it is the ability to harmonize that, all other things being equal, (it) will make one group especially talented, productive and successful, and another – with members whose talent and skill are equal in other regards – do poorly.” (Goleman, 1996, p.160)

After careful needs analysis regarding our students, we defined the key areas that needed to be covered, and consequently compiled a list of relevant essential skills. The next step logically being, coming up with activities that would help students in acquiring these crucial skills. What were those key areas?

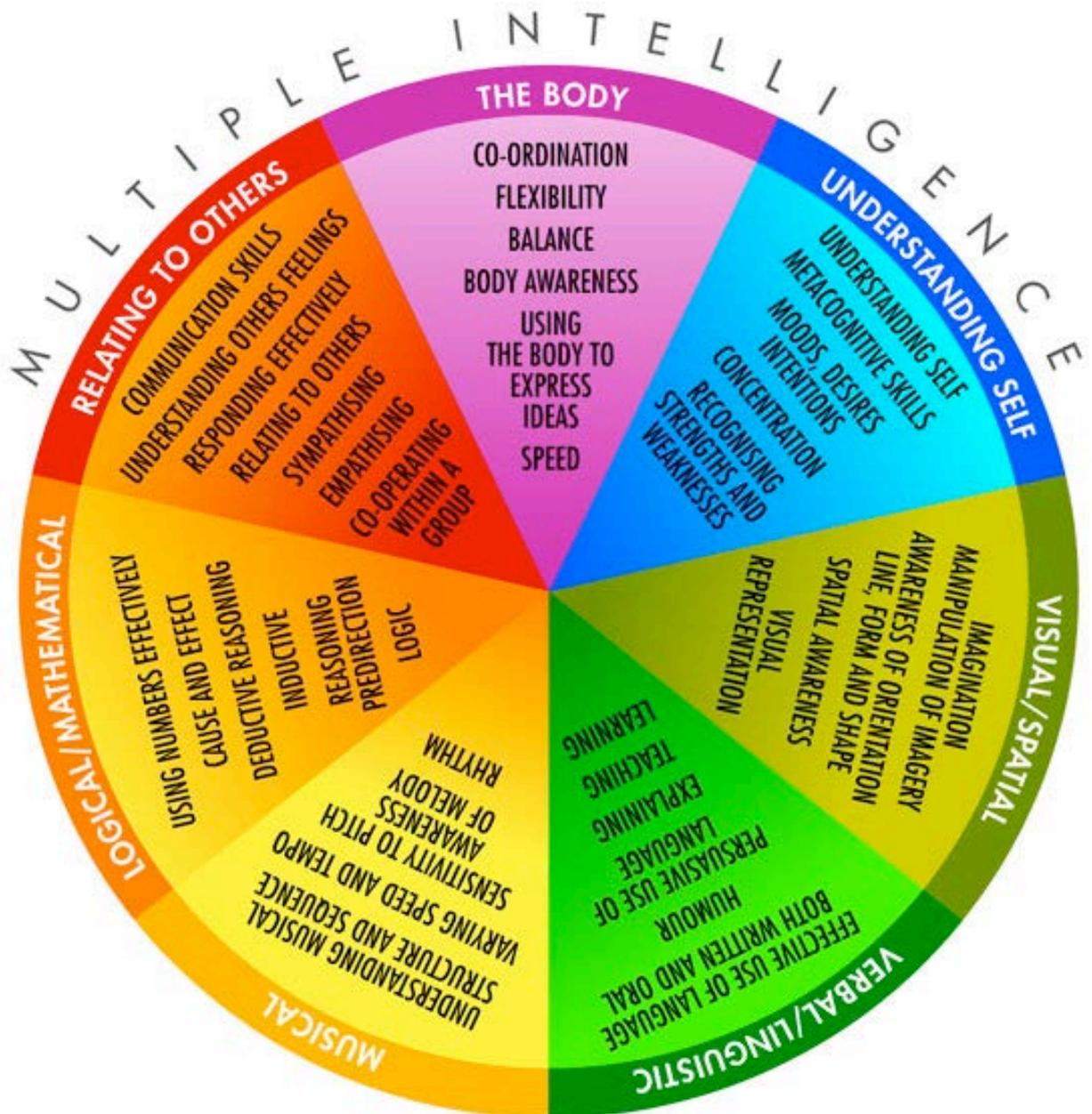
- **Ability to communicate well within a group** of peers as well as outside that group - to verbalize a message clearly, to get the message across, to understand the underlying code of a given communication exchange, level of formality, voicing a complaint, artful critique; clarity, conciseness, concreteness, correctness, coherence, completeness, courtesy, but also verifying the desired impact of the message on its recipients,
 - **ability to work in a team structure** - identifying team roles, outlining their functions and implications, determining one’s own inclinations towards a certain team role and highlighting the importance of every one of them in a team, cooperation within a team, leadership, conflict mediation,
 - **ability to make decisions and solve problems** - on individual as well as group basis, different perspectives when approaching a problem,
 - **ability to plan, organize and prioritize work** - criteria to consider, what information is needed, what information is redundant, who needs to be consulted,
 - **ability to obtain and process information** - informal and formal sources and channels of information,
 - **ability to analyze data** - input in general, decoding systems, understanding the underlying principles and sets of implicit social rules,
 - **ability to sell or influence others** - how to present oneself and things, what works in presenting to people, what doesn’t, implicit messages, focused praise, body language and how to consciously use it, validating feelings.
- Affecting and complementing all these abilities is also,
- **self-reflection** (knowing oneself, ways of self-motivation, learning how to learn, analyzing one’s weaknesses, strengths, opportunities and threats, listening to feedback on one’s own performance and being able to learn from it, determining which area

one is good at and making the best of it along with trying to make the best of the weaker areas).

After further observation, it was revealed, that for the purpose, the requisite are even more intangible skills and abilities, such as **empathy, intuition, trust, creativity, playfulness** (“If little kids could play more, you’d have better engineers, better managers and more inspiration in the workplace. If you deny a baby or a toddler the chance to play, and then put him in a preschool where he is always competing and being measured, you get fear and that leads to an unwillingness to take risks. You end up with boring adults... who look stellar on paper but lack spark, social awareness and gumption in person. They would rather be told what to do than take a problem by the scruff of the neck and solve it with a flash of brilliance. (Nigel Cumberland, former headhunter, now coach, in Honoré 2008, p.56) **initiative, self-discipline** (such as handling failure, learning from one’s own mistakes, managing change or delaying gratitude) and **cooperation**. As farfetched for university education as it sounds, it is actually feasible to train people in those.

We presumed that what was needed, were practical, authentic, hands-on experience activities that would show to students the correlation between the theory and reality without us telling them; therefore bringing into practice the key principle of education, learner learning on his or her own and therefore remembering forever. Taking inspiration everywhere, from children games through teambuilding activities to creating new dimensions to popular, always working, language teaching strategies, we compiled a portfolio of activities that can be used for virtually any purpose and any target group with a certain amount of tailoring. Some of the activities were as follows:

- **Self-presentations:** students were asked to prepare at home 5-minute-long mini-presentations of themselves; they were given absolute freedom as to the format or data they wanted to share. These presentations were then filmed and played back to students towards the very end of the course after having acquired all the necessary background. They were given a follow-up series of reflection and feedback activities to guide them through evaluating their own work as well as that of other participants. The essential elements here were: **preparation** –as they were thinking it through, they were actually getting to know themselves, which is a start to any soft skill; **presenting** – practising their presentation skills as such and realizing that a good presentation is in fact a performance, so a good degree of **creativity** is needed. They learned that getting feedback from fellow students and teachers is useful but that providing feedback on their own performance is even more useful and much more difficult than on work of other people. By comparing what they saw, they could discriminate what worked and where they failed and why, realising what they like with others and what they don’t, where to find inspiration for enhancing their skills and what they wanted to avoid at all costs.
- **Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences** – self-reflection on what intelligences are their own, using activities from the book *Knowing Me, Knowing You*.



Source: <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/multiple-intelligences>

- **Team work** – intuition – assessing the personality of somebody you have only just met and describing it – checking if other people can guess who is being described (checking accuracy of their estimates), creating an ideal team worker and presenting him/her, guiding a blinded partner through a minefield and being led in return, putting oneself into someone else's shoes...

At a certain point, we were requested to create an optional intensive course for students of Masaryk University. After the course was run several times and we reflected deeply on the feedback, we were then asked to tailor the course for language teachers, who come to the Pedagogical Faculty for more training in their own free

time. Invariably, the student-teachers could not indicate enough how essential this was in their everyday teaching and how crucial this training was.

It was rather challenging as we could not anticipate the outcome before we actually carried the course through. However, the feedbacks showed that it was a valuable and strategic decision and that calling attention towards these skills was long longed for. When participants reflected on the course, they often mentioned that the authentic situations gave them priceless experience that would change their perspective forever. They highlighted the uniqueness of the environment, since a language course is an ideal place for such training. They also emphasised that in this context, a typical classroom challenge of having a multifaceted audience, was actually a benefit, an added value, as it demonstrated naturally all the different types of people we encounter in real world. Therefore, just as we presumed, the cumulative advantage was beneficial, not taking into account the additional benefit for the teachers, and that is, virtually leading them to see how to work with their own students by setting an example. Nevertheless, some participants voiced certain reservations relating to the nature of the course – Czech reality being very conservative – that less extrovert students would not be able to benefit from the course or that result-oriented students would feel they haven't done much.

After evaluation of the course though, it was evident, that our assumption turned out valid; our mission now is to incorporate individual elements of soft skills into all courses we teach, since in a classroom, just as in a real world, there are always people to get along with. To support our argument, we put together a presentation of all relevant data to be presented at this conference and to show how these things relate to success of graduates when looking for a job and also when starting to work in one because for example in Canada 67% of senior executives say soft skills are a major characteristic missing in (job) candidates. (www.workopolis.com)

The challenges were numerous. Soft skills are intangible and, as such, it is difficult to measure the success of mastering them. Result-oriented teachers feel they aren't working productively with the class. On top of it, teaching these skills is teacher-demanding, one activity will work with one group and not with another and therefore creativity, intuition and improvisation are of utmost importance.

The positives outweighed the challenges as the lessons were always different and unique, bringing a new perspective to everybody involved, including the teachers. What works very well here is co-teaching as these groups are invariably full of insights and questions and it is crucial to adopt the material as we go along. This is best done when two teachers are present, as one is always leading an activity and the other is free to prepare the following one or is making sure everybody understood the instructions etc. With two teachers, it is worthwhile to apply the good cop – bad cop model and let the students know at the very beginning, who is who, as they are then more comfortable with somebody providing the critical point of view. Another considerable advantage is, that it can serve any purpose, any topic can be approached from that perspective, even grammar (reported speech, I wish, future, conditionals, hypothetical structures and others.) And, as was previously mentioned, unlike with ordinary classes, the more diverse the group, the better. All in all, it raises students' awareness regarding inter-personal issues and they are then able to continue the work in this area on their own, which is the desired course of action as the key here is

intermittent reinforcement. The teacher and student become more of a partner to each other and students are partly co-creating the course, bringing it close to the principles of self-directed learning or learners' autonomy, where the student is no longer instructed in what to do and how to do it. The intrinsic idea here is, to accept the students as partners and experts on their own learning (Karlsson, Kjisik, Nordlund, 2006). Nobody knows them better than they know themselves (especially not a teacher who encounters them 13 times a term for 90 minutes in a seminar group of 15). Furthermore, when the students are more involved in taking the responsibility, making the decisions and self-reflection, they are prone to show more effort in the whole learning process (Dornyei, Z., 2001).

There is another argument in favour of teaching soft skills at universities, and that is, as we as teachers, as well as the participants realised, that there is not much opportunity to acquire soft skills and to learn about them at our universities. Departments and faculties typically presume that students miraculously know how to present, how to interact, how to perform etc., and therefore do not provide any additional training in this field. The courses of English as a foreign language, English for academic purposes and specific purposes then allow students to discover and subsequently develop the skills and soft skills that will frequently be applied in their mother tongue in their respective major subjects. This is a very natural course of matters that had not occurred to us before and that naturally directs the EAP and ESP courses into the role of an instrument that helps the students both with their language skills and with their relevant studies in their mother tongue.

To sum it up, soft skills are ideal for language learning, especially at universities, they bring an element of fun into the classroom, they raise awareness; **create a platform for sharing and acknowledging differences** and they make BETTER students as well as TEACHERS. They bring more personal relationship between teachers and students which is positively sought after. Last but not least, they help our students to be more employable and better workers when employed.

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