

BLENDING INTANGIBLES: WHAT AND HOW?

Bigness comes from doing many small things well.
Individually, they are not very dramatic transactions.
Together, though, they add up. Edward S. Finkelstein

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Abstract

Globalization and internationalization have erased the boundaries between countries and made the world one small village. People can study, work or live in any part of the world. Technology has created worldwide opportunities for the youth and cashing in on this opportunity is easy for a country if it offers perfectly employable graduates, good services and facilities to those planning to invest. The strength of any country in this scenario depends on its citizens' employability skills. The more employable they are, the more progressive that country can be. The growth of any country is directly proportionate to the employability rate of that country's graduates. This article discusses the importance of intangibles, the present scenario, methods of blending these intangibles and some practical ideas to blend them. These intangibles are called so as they cannot be quantified unlike other skills. These are not physical but can be seen in a person's behavior-his confidence, his communication skills, his attitude and commitment to work etc.

Keyword: technology , employability

INTRODUCTION

Intangibles are 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'

Professor Mantz Yorke (2004) '*Employability in Higher Education: what it is - what it is not*', Higher Education Academy/ESECT

In addition, intangibles are “-those skills, abilities, and personal attributes that can be used within the wide range of working environments that graduates operate in throughout their

lives”, says Fraser (2001). A Harvard Study, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center found that 85% of one's success at the workplace is attributed to soft skills and only 15% to technical skills and knowledge (hard skills) - It is understood that employability majorly rests on a candidate's ability to get along well with people, his communication skills, his positive attitude and other such skills. When a candidate graduates, we expect him to have these attributes along with

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A study by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) The State of the Industry Report (Green and McGill, 2011), found that U.S. employers spent \$171.5 billion on employee learning and development in 2010, and 27.6% of those training dollars went to soft skills training? Corporate houses in India like TATA and Wipro too are spending their time and money on training the graduates to bridge the wide chasm between job requirements and the skills of graduates. Tata puts fresh graduates through 72 days of training, double the duration in

1986, says Tata chief executive N.

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Chandrasekaran. Wipro runs an even longer, 90-day training program to address what Mr. Govil, the human-resources executive, calls the "inherent inadequacies" in Indian engineering education. These reports establish that higher education institutes need to train graduates with 'deep' intellectual capabilities and a battery of applied practical skills which make them more 'work-ready.'" Archer & Davison (2008). Before looking at how higher education institutes can blend these skills into the curriculum, it is significant that we understand what these skills are specifically.

Soft Skills/Intangibles:

Plato rightly professed 2,000 years ago that "All learning has an emotional base." This emotional base is the foundation stone for Goleman's (1998) framework of soft skills. He terms

them as 'emotional competence.' This is a refinement of the earlier model based on statistical analyses of the emotional intelligence inventory administered by his colleague and team (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 2000).

Figure 1. A Framework of Emotional Competencies

	Self Personal Competence	Other Social Competence
Recognition	Self-awareness Emotional self-awareness Accurate self-assessment Self-confidence	Social Awareness Empathy Service orientation Organizational awareness
Regulation	Self-Management Self-control Trustworthiness Conscientiousness Adaptability Achievement drive initiative	Relationship Management Developing others Influence Communication Conflict management Leadership Change catalyst Building bonds Teamwork & collaboration

From this table, it can be deduced that communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving, team work, lifelong learning, adaptability, leadership, empathy, trust and many others are important for gaining employment. The heartwarming aspect of this emotional competence is that it is "a learned capability based on emotional intelligence that results in outstanding performance at work" (Goleman, 1998). How important these skills are in workplace can be easily demonstrated by a component in nursing that I taught in one of the summers at my institute in Oman.

Reflective Thinking:

The course that has this component is a post basic course in nursing institutes in Oman. The students of this course are returning graduates coming for a refresher course. They are experienced and have been working for quite some time in their jobs. In this component, they have to choose an experience of theirs and reflect upon it. Firstly, they relate their experience in an outline at the beginning of the course. Then they research the topic, brainstorm, collect ideas and then form a base to present their case. They find defense or opposition in the literature for their real life measures. They strengthen their case with new found knowledge. Then they present orally armed with a power point presentation. In this, they reflect upon their experience, quote the related literature, and discuss what went right and what went wrong. Then they conclude how they would have handled the situation in a better way. In almost all the cases, the need for learning qualities like better time management, leadership, trust, empathy, adaptability, lifelong learning and many other intangibles is boldly underlined. From these reflective practices, they concluded that they would have handled the situations in a better way had they been taught these skills in academic settings. The students expressed their discontent that the academic setting didn't prepare them well for the real life. They felt that these skills should be incorporated in the curriculum and should be taught either implicitly or explicitly.

Skills and attributes of today's learners:

Pictures are worth a thousand words. The following figure clearly shows the multicompetence required from today's generation of

learners. Students are expected to have these skills when they pass out of the colleges and be ready for employment. "There is no debating that a major responsibility for the smooth integration of graduates into professional life, and hence into society, lies with Higher Education Institutions. Pukelis et al (2007).

Figure 2. Skills and attributes of today's learners

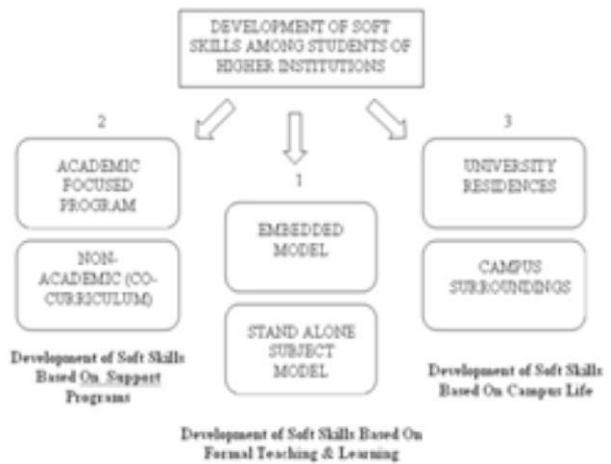


In all higher education institutes we do have some vocational programs that are expected to cater to these requirements. But enrolment of students is very meager. The factors are many and not relevant for this case. This article focuses on how the intangibles can be incorporated in regular education system. "Were all instructors to realize that the quality of the mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth, something hardly less than a revolution is teaching would be worked." John Dewey, Democracy and Education (1916).

Blending the intangibles:

Now let us look at the methods in which these intangibles can be incorporated into curriculum. There are different ways of doing it.

Figure 3. Development of soft skills among students of higher education institutions



Source: Maria Salih, Sultan Idris University of Education, Malaysia -2009

This model incorporates three ways of blending the intangibles. 1. Development of soft skills based on support programs, 2. Development of soft skills based on formal teaching and learning and 3. Development of soft skills based on campus life. Our focus again is on formal teaching and learning model. There are two ways of integrating these intangibles into curriculum: a. Stand Alone Subject Model and b. Embedded Model. Let us look at these models in more detail.

a. Stand Alone Subject Model: Distinct and need based courses that focus on one or a few skills are provided out of the regular curriculum. They are prudently programmed and are elective in nature. They are part of a larger curriculum and can contribute in a small way

to the overall GPA of the student. Also these are extra credit courses that a student can choose to take or not. For example, oral communication program, time management course or entrepreneurship courses. The students can be encouraged to take up these courses to have an all-round development and more employable. Nonetheless, it can burden the student with additional courses and credits and he/she may not be interested to divide their attention between academic and nonacademic courses.

b. Embedded Model: Here in this approach, intangibles are integrated and be part of

learning outcomes of formal teaching and learning courses. Soft skills are spelled out explicitly in the learning outcomes and then interpreted in the instructional plan for the semester. This is tracked in the classrooms in form of oral presentations, debates, group work, role play and brains storming. Cooperative learning, problem-based learning and e- learning can be some of the appropriate teaching strategies. That way, content and learning outcomes for the respective courses are sustained. In addition, the student need not enroll in any special or extra courses as in stand-alone model.

Both these models have their highs and lows. Stand-alone model is easy on planning, execution and assessment. It is advantageous from the teachers' viewpoint. Nevertheless, it can tax the student with extra effort and time. Moreover, these courses remain isolated from the main stream. Embedded model, on the other hand, needs more effort on part of the teachers in f o r m u l a t i n g t h e l e a r n i n g o u t c o m e s , implementation and assessment of these intangibles. How can one assess group work and therefore leadership or organizational skills? However, the students are not required to take any extra courses and their time and effort is undivided. In

addition, integrated approach slowly but steadily builds up the required skills set. "When you do something repeatedly – trying to perform up to an explicit standard – your mind gets the 'feel' of doing it proficiently. The 'feel' of doing is the skill." – (Szul, (2000)). Hence, it is advisable to use the embedded model when compared to stand-alone model as the former places less stress on the student and is learner supportive. It includes practical experience as well.

Instruction Prototypes :

In the Foundation Institute, Ministry of Health, Oman, where I work, we follow the embedded system of teaching soft skills. There are several components that have specific soft skills as part of learning outcomes. The content

of these components is designed in such a way that it achieves the specified learning outcomes. All these components are being implemented after collecting the feedback via q u e s t i o n n a i r e s , d i s c u s s i o n s a n d recommendations of the specialized nursing institutes to which the foundation students graduate.

- Mini Research Project
- Oral Presentations
- Debates Academic Reading
- Independent Reading SRA Research Lab



Level 1: The components in this level include amongst many others oral presentations, introductory units, and independent study materials like science booklets. Introductory units teach the students different parts of a book, locating the different aspects of bibliography, cross

referencing and how to locate a book relevant to their subject in a library. They are also taught dictionary skills. The students comprehend the significance of independent learning, take responsibility of their learning and learn time management in submitting their completed work after checking their answers against the answer key provided online at a specific time. The students then apply these skills in locating a book or an article in a library when they are taken for a library visit in Level 2.

Level 2: In level 2, along with academic components like reading and writing, the students also have SRA research lab component wherein they choose to read three articles in topics that they find fascinating. For example, they have a range of topics to choose from like transportation, communication, history, biology and many others. The students can choose from three different categories.

Once they read the article, they choose one of the two research problems listed at the end of the article they read. Here they apply all the skills they learnt in level 1 and report the problem and its solution. From the three such reports they write, they choose one and present it to the class armed with a power point. These presentation skills have been taught in level 1. Then they have debates where their group work, research, brainstorm and other such skills are exhibited. In groups they choose the debate topics, divide the tasks of collecting the information, summarizing, presenting and answering the questions. Fact-filled and fervent debates offer the motivation for students of all academic and socioeconomic levels to become involved during collecting information and presentation and thus contributing to the debate process. In addition, students express their opinions freely but respectfully on a relevant issue. They learn to take turns, be leaders and guide the conversation along their line of thinking. They also get trained in authenticating their opinions with evidence from research.

Level 3: This is final level of Foundation Program and is the culmination point of all the skills learnt in different levels. Apart from academic reading and writing, they do a mini research project. An exhaustive but relevant list of topics is given to the students to choose from. After they choose the topic, and initial introduction by the teacher, students go away to research the topic. They have a library visit once again. They employ all the strategies learnt in 2 levels and analyze, synthesize and evaluate the relevant literature and complete the project. They are guided by the teacher from time to time or whenever necessary. There are timelines that they have to stick to and submit their work or parts of their work according to the set dates. This mini research project has many advantages: it is learner centered, collective, context-based and academic among many others.

- **Learner-Centered:** Students choose the topic they want to research on, they have freedom in that sense. They can choose the topic that they are interested and feel is

relevant and want to learn more about.

- **Collective:** Teachers are facilitators of learning and students become actively involved in this process. Teachers and students are equal partners and share their experience, knowledge in analyzing and interpreting the data collected and tabulating the results.
- **Context-based:** It is context-based as the topics are related to everyday life of students and their country. A problem that persists in the society they live is chosen for them to conduct their research on.
- **Academic:** It is highly academic and they become responsible too. It requires the recognition of a researchable question, the thoughtful planning of a proper research design and reflection of the consequences of the research for practice.
- **Hands-on and significant:** The whole process of research gives them hands-on experience as they are going to specialize in the field where they are required to be life-long learners.
- **Continual:** This mini research project is a long learning process and questions might lead to new questions and then it can result in cascading inquiries.

Apart from these there are other components like Academic Reading, Science Booklets and Preventive Medicine done by the students as self-study. All these components are evaluated and assessed along the rubrics informed to the students well in advance. Only those components are listed that are found to be incredibly different and rewarding when compared to the other curriculums in other institutes. These are found to inculcate the required soft skills set in the students without much burden on them and also make them more independent and competent to tackle any situation that they come across. There is an added bonus of student motivation, life-long learning and development of sense of strong ethics as they know the consequences of plagiarism and research ethics.

To conclude, survival of the fittest, the expression used by Herbert Spencer in 1864 applies to this day. It is more than apt for the field of employment. The fitter a person is the better employable he will be. 85% of this fitness comes from soft skills or intangibles. Quality human assets come from quality education. The primary concern of a country's government, which perceives higher education as an investment contributing to national prosperity is the

maximum employability of its graduates. Hence it is imperative that higher education institutions (HEIs) that are imparted with this huge responsibility rise to the occasion by embedding life skills / soft skills/ or intangibles and train the students and give them every opportunity to practice these skills. They should have these attributes spelled out in their vision and mission statements, their teaching and learning strategies and the staff should be made aware that promoting these life skills is compatible with the aim of producing global employees.

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