

Developing a Pedagogy of Behaviour Change

Richard Almonte

Good afternoon everyone. My name is Richard Almonte. I'm a Communication professor in George Brown College's Centre for Business, where I've been working for 12 years. I've also been lucky in that time to develop and teach a handful of literature and cultural studies courses for Georgia's School of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

I'd like to begin by thanking the organizers of today's conference both for putting on a great conference, and also for choosing this proposal as one worthy of being heard by everyone at the conference. We tend to move a lightning speed in the colleges, teaching semester after semester after semester, and so it's very appealing to have the chance to slow down and reflect on what we do.

I'd also like to acknowledge my fellow panelists for the intellectual rigour and persuasiveness of the ideas they've presented so far, and with which I hope my own ideas will come along cozily or perhaps slightly disruptively... I'm not sure which yet. Perhaps the audience will let us know?

Before I begin my remarks I would like to say that what I'm about to describe reflects the experience of not only me but of four fellow professors in the Centre for Business (three of whom are here today) who have participated in the development and piloting of the course I'm about to describe. They are Frank Maloney, Morris Marshall, Roger Cecchetto and Ted Snell. If questions arise from what I say today, I know that Frank and Ted and Roger will be happy to help me field them. I'd also like to acknowledge my Chair Kathy Dumanski, Academic Director Elizabeth Speers, and Dean Maureen Loweth, as well as Jean Choi, Chair of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and Georgia Quartaro, all of whom have, in their own ways, championed this project.

So let's get started. As someone trained to do literary analysis, I always begin with titles. Authors usually nest hints towards the preferred meaning of their work in these all-important phrases, and the title of this plenary session is no different. "Citizenship, Wonder, or Employability?" is a classic conference session title, in the sense that it sets up a seeming choice

between apparent opposites – in this particular title I take ‘citizenship’ and ‘wonder’ to be offered jointly in opposition to ‘employability’ – all in the form of a rhetorical question, thus whetting the audience’s appetite to find out both which is the better answer to the question: choice a) or choice b) and also to perhaps hear a bit of an argument between panelists defending their points of view.

Perhaps disappointingly for the audience, and like Robert earlier, I’m going to dampen the thrill usually achieved via this sort of suspense by letting you know that the experience of developing our “Successful Social Relations” course has shown us that postsecondary education, from both a theoretical-conceptual and a practical delivery point of view, doesn’t have to be an either/or proposition: either skills or knowledge, but not both.

In our case, we’ve created a course that pretty neatly synthesizes the two extremes gestured at in this plenary’s title, i.e. knowledge and skills (what Robert calls transaction/transformation) by building a course that includes equal amounts of both. It’s a course that leverages the type of creative thinking Jennifer described and the sort of overarching knowledge-filter that Thomas presented with the sort of transactional employment-focused skills Robert referenced.

Unlike Robert, however, who concluded that balancing the two poles is going to be a challenge for educators, I will argue that we’ve met the challenge in our course, and are finding that students are thriving and deriving lots of benefits from this affirming, mongrel experience.

But I don’t want to get too far ahead of myself: so back to the beginning. A brief history of how we became among the first PSE divisions within a Canadian post-secondary institution to make it mandatory that all students take a course in what the media and business call “soft skills” – in other words, affective skills for *being* effective with other people – that tend to make the workplace a more enjoyable and effective place in which to be.

The story begins back in 2011. Academic leaders in the Centre for Business were hearing reports from employer-partners that while our graduates had a great command of various “hard skills”, from spreadsheet manipulation, to the drawing up of financial plans for clients, to project management, these same students were often missing something.

For instance, they were missing some savvy in interviews, and in meetings with colleagues and clients; or they had a bit of a chip on their shoulders about work in general; or they showed an inability to appear engaged and interested by tasks and duties. Eventually, this negative feedback became loud enough that I was asked to conduct some research into soft skills, how they might be taught, and whether other PSE institutions were doing something we could use.

In short, in the course of conducting a literature review I found that the concept of soft skills is definitely under-researched and theorized in the academy, although the importance of such skills (though researchers don't call them "soft") is highly contested separately by ethics, psychology, and interpersonal communication scholars. In various government and consulting reports we do at least see the term "soft skills" being used, but as often as not to point out how over-determined or hard-to-pin-down the term is. For example, a widely disseminated McKinsey Center for Government report from January 2013 points out that:

...soft skills encompass such a wide range of concepts, from personal characteristics (confidence, temperament, work ethic) to social and cognitive skills (communications, problem solving). As a result, the term means different things to different people.

For example, when we spoke with managers from a hospitality company regarding their expectations of teamwork, they told us the focus was on whether their employees possessed tolerant attitudes that are important in interacting with a wide range of guests. Asked the same question, an engineering executive singled out the extent to which the employees were able to work and think in cross-functional teams.

Same concept, same words, two very different interpretations. (Mourshed, et al., 67)

At the same time as report authors have a hard time pinning down a definition, and scholars, perhaps due to the interdisciplinary nature of the concept, haven't seriously concerned themselves, the self-help and business sections of any Indigo bookstore abound with titles like *Soft Skills Revolution* and *The Hard Truth about Soft Skills*. So we do know that the concept of soft skills is fertile ground, not just among employers. In terms of soft skills and other institutions, the closest I came was Fleming College's Emotional Intelligence course that was piloted and rolled-out in a limited way in 2006 (Bond and Manser, 2009). And I heard this morning at the

CALL conference at Durham College that Georgian College is thinking of doing something similar in a professionalism course.

The next step was to investigate how to nest soft skills in the curriculum in a more forceful way than has already been attempted with MTCU's mandated Essential Employability Skills. I proposed to the Centre of Business that this could happen in one of three ways: through a passport gained by completing a series of modules within already-existing courses (our Nursing programs, for example, have a similar passport, though it targets a different skill set), through successful completion of a dedicated course, or through a set of co-curricular activities that might evince the soft skills. Interestingly, there were voices in favour of the first and third option, but not the second – and eventually implemented – option.

At this point we were ready to build a case for a soft skills intervention by surveying employers in the GTA. We received significant help here from the college's Marketing department, and I'd like to mention Tanja Coughlan particularly. Our survey was answered by 350 GTA organizations, equally split among small-, medium-, and large-size. Employers were presented with a menu of about 25 soft skills – behaviours, attitudes, and skills around employees' relations with each other, clients, and managers, and also employees' attitudes toward work – and asked them to choose the ones they found most important for their new employees to demonstrate, as well as the ones they felt their employees needed to utilize at work on a regular basis.

In addition, employers were asked what form of validation they would find most acceptable; in other words, would they be more liable to interview and hire a student with a soft skills *course*, or one with a *passport*, etc. The survey found that employers liked the idea of a soft skills course as much as they did a passport, both of which they liked more than the idea of a co-curricular record. In terms of the actual soft skills, employers reported back a list of what we've come to call our "top 6": things they overwhelmingly want to see in their employees and which they believe their employees need to utilize frequently at work. I'll get to these in a minute.

With this information in hand, we eventually ruled out the passport option, because it wasn't feasible from an administrative capability standpoint, not to mention the need to train potentially dozens of faculty to nest and teach soft skills modules – consistently – in their curriculum, all in

the face of a landscape in which greater numbers of NFT faculty are teaching our courses. In addition, we shied away from the co-curricular model given that we were told the college on a wider level was considering moving that way. So it was decided that we'd move ahead with the mandatory course model.

An immediate hiccup that turned out to be a blessing was that it wasn't possible, for various reasons, to carve out a slot for a mandatory course for all Business students within their own programs. Core area faculty in Marketing and HR and Finance are very territorial in this respect! As a result, we entered into a discussion with Jean and Georgia about whether we could create a mandatory GNED elective – please note the paradox. In other words, could we take one of the four GNED electives Business students take and make one of them mandatory, be about soft skills, and, furthermore, have it conform to GNED conceptual guidelines while not being created by GNED faculty. It was a tall order, and I'm very happy that cooperation between Liberal Arts and Sciences and Business won the day.

So I was tasked with developing basic curriculum materials: a course outline; teaching materials such as lecture notes and PowerPoint slides; assessment materials. Thinking back to my days as a Bachelor of Education student and my curriculum development and philosophy of education courses, I recognized that the soft skills course needed more than just these discrete materials. It needed its own theoretical underpinning.

Reading John Dewey's seminal *Experience and Education* (1938) had convinced me (neophyte though I was back in 1995) that the classroom needed to balance knowledge-transfer with experiential learning. As Dewey shows, there's no point in getting hung up on the seeming binary aspect of traditional vs. progressive, because progressive done badly can be just as stultifying as traditional knowledge transfer done badly. Rather, Dewey suggests that it is the *authenticity* of experiences in a progressive classroom, i.e. to what degree they helpfully and realistically connect students to future experiences and growth, that makes them worth designing and undertaking. So I wanted this new course to be full of authentic experiences about the "top 6" soft skills – teamwork, oral communication, work ethic, problem-solving orientation, customer service orientation, and likeability – in which students could use what they already know and have experienced, to solve problems that they will most probably encounter in their future.

In addition, I needed a modality – a way to create this authenticity of experience. Here, I fell back on a gut instinct about my own area of specialization – literature and narrative – and its relationship to soft skills. If you analyze our top 6 list you’ll see that at least half of the six skills (teamwork, customer service orientation, likeability) are about an individual’s relations with others, and more specifically an ability to empathize with them and their needs to get the job done. Recent research (that I’m very interested in) conducted by the psychologists Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley at York and U of T has shown that reading narratives, i.e. fictional plots with characters, settings, etc. increases empathy levels (Mar, Oatley and Peterson, 2009). It struck me that rich case studies: mini-character and situation-driven narratives in which the six soft skills were being ignored or used poorly, would be an effective way of creating authentic experience and having students analyze and re-work the situations to make them better.

With Dewey’s authenticity of experience and the Mar Lab’s proof of a connection between the experience of narrative and increased empathy in mind, my colleagues Frank, Morris, Roger and Ted came onboard (this was May of last year) to polish the basic materials, create a rich suite of assessments, and then pilot the course. The marked innovation that came out of this final period of curriculum development was, I believe, our decision to comingle the idea of authentic experience, with the evidence of the usefulness of narrative, with a third productive factor: the use of modelling techniques from social learning theory (a branch of psychology we discuss in the course), especially the use of negative and positive model displays, which have been shown to have a “significant negative effect on reproduction” of negative behaviours. (Baldwin, 1992)

In other words, the heart of our course is a series of three richly detailed case studies in which a *negative* version of one of the top 6 soft skills is being demonstrated by one or more characters. We read these case studies out loud together, and then students solve the case study by offering an inductive written analysis of problems and offer of solutions combined with deeper research into the skill, whether it’s attitudinal, behavioural, or skill-based.

Critically, in our course, students *must re-write the events of the case study in the form of an improved script and then shoot and edit that script*

into a video that is presented to the class. Through this re-scripting and shooting, they *essentially become the modellers of an improved version of the soft skills in question*, whether a customer-service orientation, likeability/positivity, or teamwork skills. Our belief, corroborated by studies such as Baldwin's cited earlier, and buttressed by Dewey's ideas and recent findings on the narrative/increased empathy connection, is that students will choose positive versions of soft skills behaviours and attitudes in future interactions, having been exposed to negative examples and then being tasked with turning those negative examples into positive examples and sharing them with the class.

In addition, and at Jean Choi's suggestion, we include three opportunities for reflection and critique. We ask students to consider the concepts they're learning in ethics, psychology, and interpersonal communication, and to tell us how these concepts interface with their lived experience. Crucially, we ask them to think skeptically about the concepts – for example, mediated communication is generally believed to have a negative impact on interpersonal communication, but some students have seen things differently, and found research sources to back up their experience.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in focus groups that have been carried out with our two pilot cohorts (Fall 2014 and Winter 2015), as well as SFQs from these two semesters, we've found that students are overwhelmingly happy with the intent and content of the course.

They report understanding the necessity for the course to be mandatory – some even going so far as to state it should be mandatory across the college – and they also report feeling that what they've learned and experienced in the course has already helped them in both their personal and work lives. For example, students have mentioned discussing the course in job interviews, as well as gaining a greater sense of self-esteem and confidence.

As the course transitions from being a pilot to its first regular iteration this Fall, we're confident that students will continue to enjoy and find the course useful, and that eventually, word will get out to employers of GBC grads when these students begin to graduate, land interviews and talk about the course, and enter the workforce and use their soft skills. Thank you.

References

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