

## INCULCATING SOFT SKILLS IN TERTIARY LEVEL STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

Increasingly, employers look for requisite soft skills in the graduates they hire. Lack of soft skills can limit one's potential to fully develop and may also hamper the implementation of their hard skills. Our current education system is more focused on hard skills rather than soft skills. As a result, when graduates enter the job sector they face a huge gap in what they have learned and what/how they are expected to do or perform. Because when a new employee joins a company they are expected to have Communication Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Teamwork Skills, Flexibility and Professional Etiquette. But lecture based learning doesn't quite prepare them for this situation. As a result, employees may take too much time to cope with the job environment and responsibilities, and in many cases even lose the job before they can get any opportunity to show their hard skill capabilities. Keeping this in mind, a course titled "Certification in Employability Skills (CES)" has been put together using the Effective Neuralistic Engagement Model (ENEM) which ensures that the participants take ownership of developing the skills in themselves through brainstorming and activities that involve interaction with their peers. A number of pilot runs have shown that the course develops confidence in basic skills and critical thinking skills.

**Field of Research:** *Employability Skills, Soft Skill Development, Interactive Learning.*

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### 1. Introduction

Which set of skills is most important when it comes to employment or even any other aspect of life? The answer is employability skills also known as soft skills. But what is actually soft skills? According to Dr. Jacquelyn P. Robinson Employability skills are those basic skills necessary for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job (Robinson, J. P., 2000). Some of these skills are: communication skills, critical and structured thinking, problem solving skills, creativity, teamwork capability, negotiating skills, self-management, time management, conflict management, cultural awareness, common knowledge, responsibility, etiquette and good manners, courtesy, self-esteem, sociability, integrity / honesty, empathy, work ethic, project management (Schulz, B., 2008). Lack of these skills limits one's ability to manifest their acquired hard skills and project their full potential. It also may hamper the acquisition of hard subject skills being taught as the core subject. But in our current education system, we are more focused on hard skills.

As a result, when graduates enter the job sector they face a huge gap in what they have learned and what/how they are expected to do or perform. Lecture based learning doesn't quite prepare them for this situation. As a result, employees may take too much time to cope with the job environment and responsibilities, and in many cases even lose the job before they can get any opportunity to show their hard skill capabilities.

In a survey done by Career Builder on April 10, 2014, it has been revealed that a vast majority of 77 percent employers believe that soft skills are just as important as hard skills and other sixteen percent of employers said soft skills are more important than hard skills when evaluating candidates for a job

(Grasz, J., 2014). So in order to make the graduates into employable assets, we must build up these soft skills in them together with their hard skills.

The course under study is called Certificate in Employability Skills (CES). To close the skills gap, each lesson in the CES course is built in such a manner that the candidates are motivated, through activities, to start taking ownership of their ideas, searching for resources, comparing their own ideas with other existing ideas, implementing them and justifying their actions. This course has 36 lessons and the activities that each lesson includes are brainstorming, idea cards, categorizing, poster planning, comparing ideas, presenting ideas. Each lesson ensures metacognition, promotes ownership and develops self-esteem. In this paper we have analysed the outcome of the CES course.

## 2. Background

To figure out the challenges for the fresh graduate, at Daffodil International University we arranged a workshop with 36 eminent corporate leaders (CEO/COO/Divisional Heads) of different national and multinational companies on July 16, 2016. This purpose of this workshop was to find the gap between employer's expectations and candidate's skill set acquired through their academic curriculum.

Using the card technique we engaged the leaders to think and share their opinions on idea cards about what they look for in a candidate and how can the condition of our graduated be improved. Then they categorized the idea cards into columns and gave a title. The ideas that were generated are displayed in the Table 1.

Table 1: Ideas generated through the workshop with industry leaders

<b>Change Policy</b>	<b>Improve Tech Savvy</b>	<b>Incorporate Practical Learning</b>	<b>Attitude Behaviours</b>	<b>Analytical Skills</b>	<b>Industry University Collaboration</b>	<b>Essential Skills</b>
Change national policy	Tech transformation	Practice based syllabus & teaching method	Lack of patience	Critical thinking skills	The internship will be more focused	Entrepreneurial
Demand based industry practice	Knowledge in MS-excel	Education is not practical oriented	Empathy	Knowledge gap at job market	More graduate/fresher orientation program needed	Communication skills
Industry practice duration may be increased	Compliance sense	Practical example need in syllabus	Proactive thinking	Creativity	To involve corporate leaders	Communication skills
Professionals may be involved	Information gap in cv	More research based syllabus	Taking initiatives	Research	More focus on internship & factory visit	Need to develop their language skills
Lack of our education system	Technological knowledge	Practical syllabus	Dedication	Analytical and case study from real life	Industry & university collaboration	Communication
Academics go for internship	IT skills	Demand based syllabus	Preparation	Find their expertise side	Industry & university collaboration	Teach them languages

<b>Change Policy</b>	<b>Improve Tech Savvy</b>	<b>Incorporate Practical Learning</b>	<b>Attitude Behaviours</b>	<b>Analytical Skills</b>	<b>Industry University Collaboration</b>	<b>Essential Skills</b>
Students need to understand contents	Technical education	Every two years syllabus will be modified	Grooming	Understanding market & information trend	Tendency to learn new things outside their curriculum	Communication
	ICT skills	Focus on industry requirements	Behavioural counselling	SWOT analysis of one self	To make enough training centre	Presentation skills
	Tech transformation	More job & industry research	Lack of right attitude	Goal setting		Communication skills
	IT knowledge	Formulate practical competence	Reactiveness	Information collection		Comprehensive knowledge
	Technical, technological knowledge	Make them more practical	Commitment	Unplanned career		Writing skills
	IT (computer skill)	More internship placement	Lack of integrity			Effective communications skills
		Include professional training	Lacking in positive mental attitude (pma)			Communication
		Industry demand analysis	Continuous learning skills			Business communication
		Syllabus should be on industry relevant	Lack of passions to learn and self-development			Body language
		Interactive class	Responsible			Communication skills
		More career oriented subject	Well mannered			
		Extra curriculum	Lack of self-esteem			

<b>Change Policy</b>	<b>Improve Tech Savvy</b>	<b>Incorporate Practical Learning</b>	<b>Attitude Behaviours</b>	<b>Analytical Skills</b>	<b>Industry University Collaboration</b>	<b>Essential Skills</b>
		Relevant learning	Work ethics			
			Mind set for contribution			
			Confidence			

Analysing the data from Table 1 we found that most of the titles cards suggest 7 areas that need our attention. They are change policy, improve tech savvy, incorporate practical learning, attitude behaviours, analytical skills, industry university collaboration, and essential skills. If we look at the title cards and the cards under them we can analyse that most of them are indicating towards the necessity of changing traditional learning style and improving the soft skills of the graduates.

To tackle this situation we started to develop the course "CES" that will help the students improve their soft skills and be prepared to face the requirements of job life.

### **3. Literature Review**

Nowadays employers look for graduates with the ability to understand and respond to problems. However, only academic achievements are not sufficient to convince employers. A job seekers must demonstrates a balance between good academic knowledge and possessing soft skills (Shakir, R., 2009). According to Marcel M. Robles, soft skills such as- Communication, Courtesy, Flexibility, Integrity, Interpersonal Skills, Positive Attitude, Professionalism, Responsibility, Teamwork, Work Ethic etc; are some of the skills that are sought after by the companies (Robles, M. M., 2012). Soft skills are mandatory for an employee, no matter what type of job they must perform.

Specific skills such as problem solving and communication as valuable have been identified by a large number of countries to be important for students, also few of countries provide additional details about how can these skills should be integrated into their curriculum and how they wish to inculcate it through the formal education (Care, E., Kim, H., Anderson, K., & Gustafsson-Wright, E., 2017). Even developed countries are updating their curriculum to focus on the kinds of soft skills which are needed for young people throughout their lives (Lucas, B., 2018).

Different approach and research are being done on how can develop soft skills among students. Few of the suggested ideas for developing soft skills are: practical learning should be incorporated into classroom learning (Kumar, S., & Hsiao, J. K., 2007), learning through peer review (Cassidy, S., 2006), comparison based learning (Hagmann, J., Almekinders, C. J. M., Bukenya, C., Guevara, F., & Halemichael, A., 2003). The issues with these approaches are that they mostly focused on a certain skill. This study evaluates a course which is targeted to tackle a set of soft skills for students from any discipline to benefit from it.

### **4. Methodology**

Certification in Employability Skills is developed following the ENEM method. ENEM is designed in a manner that it forces the participants to engage into the problem and find its solution. The ENEM model is illustrated in Figure 1.

The first activity brainstorming engages the students at the very beginning of each lesson by starting with a question and moves forward by hooking one question to another. The question based approach is a key part of this course as a relevant question can excite, disturb, or comfort, and eventually yield an unexpected bounty of understanding and critical awareness (Serrat, O., 2017). After the main question is given to the candidates, they are divided into pairs and are asked to discuss answers to the

question/s. The facilitator must keep a keen eye on the participants to make sure that the question and background is understood and that every pair is focusing.

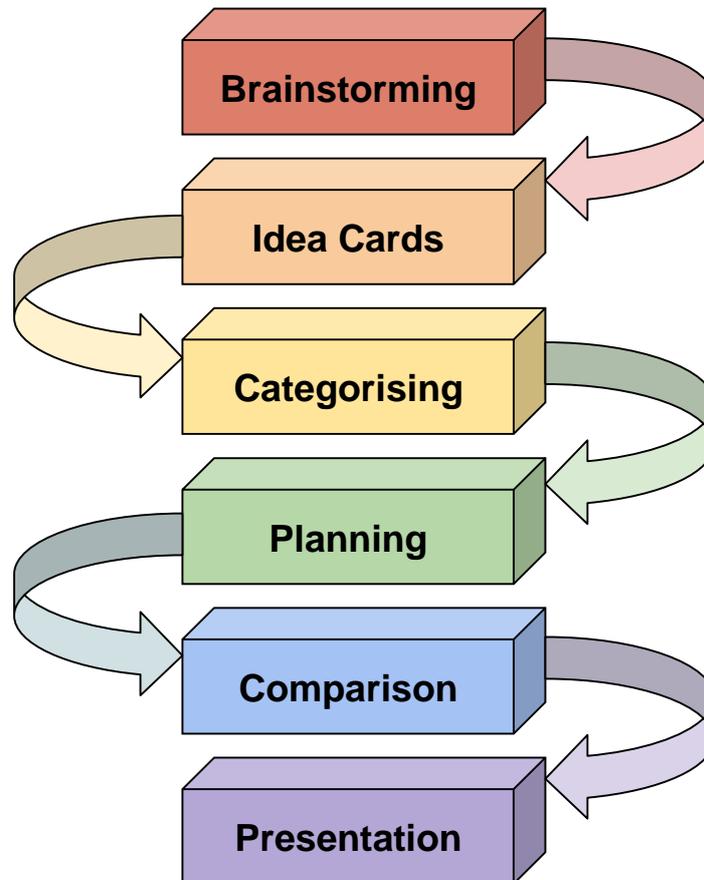


Figure 1: Effective Neuralistic Engagement Model (ENEM)

After the students get involved in the discussion and come up with some ideas, they are provided with idea cards and a marker to write down their ideas as phrases or keywords on the cards in landscape format and in large fonts. They must log each idea in a separate card.

When the participants have completed writing down their ideas two volunteers collect the idea cards and come up to the front. They read out the idea while showing each card and stick them to a board. After all the cards are on the board the class is asked to classify cards into separate columns and label each column according to the ideas visible in the column. This activity is very helpful in bringing up their confidence as they can see the ideas that they wrote down were not incorrect but was thought from a specific/different perspective and thus gives them the confidence of thinking for themselves.

In the next step, the class is broken down into 4-6 groups and given the challenge to tackle a problem applying their solution. They are now free to use additional resources. They can refer to existing theories on the topic and find any resources they need to solve the problem. Taking their own ideas from the columns they just sorted, they work in groups to make a plan to solve the situation. Here they acquire teamwork skills such as leadership, communication, collaboration and emotional intelligence required dealing with such situations. As each idea has been given value by the entire class, this acts as recognition of their ability to think and that their thoughts are equally valuable as also everyone else's ideas – thus giving importance to ideas rather than individuals.

Each collaborating group presents and justifies their solution ideas. They can compare with the theory and with ideas from other presentations. This gives them a better understanding of the whole topic and they can analyse their own plan more deeply.

This gives them confidence and ownership of their own solutions. The whole process gives experience of critical thinking on the problem and gives them confidence to continue thinking on their own.

These steps have proven to help them in bringing out the hidden potential of the participants. After completing these course candidates have shown more confidence in themselves, handled situations more skilfully, were more observant to the task given to them and analysed about the possible solutions to a task more in depth.

### 5. How the class works

To understand how CES works let's take the second class of CSE titled "Interpersonal Skills" as an example. At first to familiarize the students with the topic instead of giving the some data we ask them if they have any person whom they idolize. At this point they are engaged in the topic. Now they are asked to visualize that person and think about "What qualities attract you to a person?" Working in pairs they brainstorm and write down the qualities them like in a person. Then they are provided with cards and markers where they write their ideas in phrases or keywords. After they have transferred their ideas on the cards they come up to the board and paste it. After pasting the cards they are asked to cluster them and give each column a title card. Figure 2 illustrates the idea cards generated in one such session.

At this moment the board contains the skills or qualities the participants themselves idolize, so now they can't turn away from these skills or qualities necessity. Next they are asked to look at the title cards and plan on how they can develop these skills in themselves. In Figure 3 one of the posters designed by the participants is demonstrated. As the participants design the poster they keep they think about their abilities and limitations, so when they implement the plan they can take the ownership and trust in it. Moreover this task helps them build up their teamwork, communication skill, leadership, deductive reasoning.



Figure 2: Idea cards generated by the participants

Finally they present the poster in front of other participants and also compare their poster with others. This helps them to improve their presentation skill, broaden their point of view and also build up their confidence level.



Figure 3: Poster created by the participants

## 5. Incorporating metacognition

Metacognition is a process of planning, monitoring, and assessing one's thoughts (Martinez, M. E., 2006). In teaching and learning process metacognition plays an important part as it affects acquisition, comprehension, retention and application of what is learned, in addition to affecting learning efficiency, critical thinking, and problem solving (Veenman, M. V., Van Hout-Wolters, B. H., & Afflerbach, P., 2006). In CES course, from the start to the end the candidates are kept in an environment where they must think about the possible ideas, discuss with others to plan out the solution that they can apply to solve their own problems. In other words, they are thinking about the cognitive ways to solve the problem. And after completing this course searching and planning solutions become more like a second nature to the candidates. Table 2 demonstrates the metacognition levels that are incorporated through each steps of the CES course.

Table 2: How the CES involves metacognition, inculcates ownership and develops self-esteem

Steps	Metacognition	Example	Ownership	Self-esteem
Question	Initiating the thinking process	What qualities attract you to a person?	Generating their own ideas	I have the ability to think
Idea cards	Brainstorming and thinking about what ideas to record	Finding the attractive skills that attract	Figuring out what are the possible attractive interpersonal skills	Getting the opportunity to think to improve their self-esteem

Steps	Metacognition	Example	Ownership	Self-esteem
	Pair-work, questioning each other			
Category	Think of meta concepts that represents a group of cards	Some common titles are: communicable, honest, neighbourly, positivity, liable.	They see that their ideas have a place in the meta category and has a value	They gain confidence as their ideas are valued under a category
Planning	Planning on how to find the possible solution for the situation.	Planning on how to develop their own interpersonal skills.	Since the ideas are their own, the plan is for developing skills in themselves by themselves	Since the ideas are their own they are willing to try out developing themselves
Comparing	Thinking about the differences and similarities	Finding the similarities and differences between their plan and the plan given in the slides.	By comparing their plan with the plan given they can better understand their own plan	By understanding their own plan better they are in a better position for implementation
Presentation	Thinking and planning how to present their ideas in front of an audience	Presenting their plan on how to develop their interpersonal skills.	When the justify their plan in front of others they come up with ideas on how to improve it	While defending their idea in front of a crowd they build up confidence in their ideas

## 6. Results

We collected feedbacks from 33 students who have recently completed CES. In the feedback form we have asked about their status on following aspects of their life pre and post to CES: willingness to tackle anything new, motivation to improve, study skills, English language skills, presentation skills, thinking skills, interpersonal skills & time management. We have summarized the feedback into three categories:

- Improved: If the candidate had some skills and improved after the course
- Newly gained: If the candidate didn't had the skills and gained after the course
- No changed: If the candidate didn't have any improvement after the course

In the Figure 4 the summary data is illustrated into chart.

We also asked the participants if they would recommend this course for others and all 33 participants had positive response regarding the course.

Here is what some of the participants of this course have to say:

Participant 1: *“CES course has changed my view of life. I used to be afraid taking in front of the audience. But after doing this course I can say that it has improved my communication and interpersonal skills. In addition, it has also helped to develop my professional skills. I would tell others to do the course if they want to improve.”*

CES participant's response on pre and post skill status

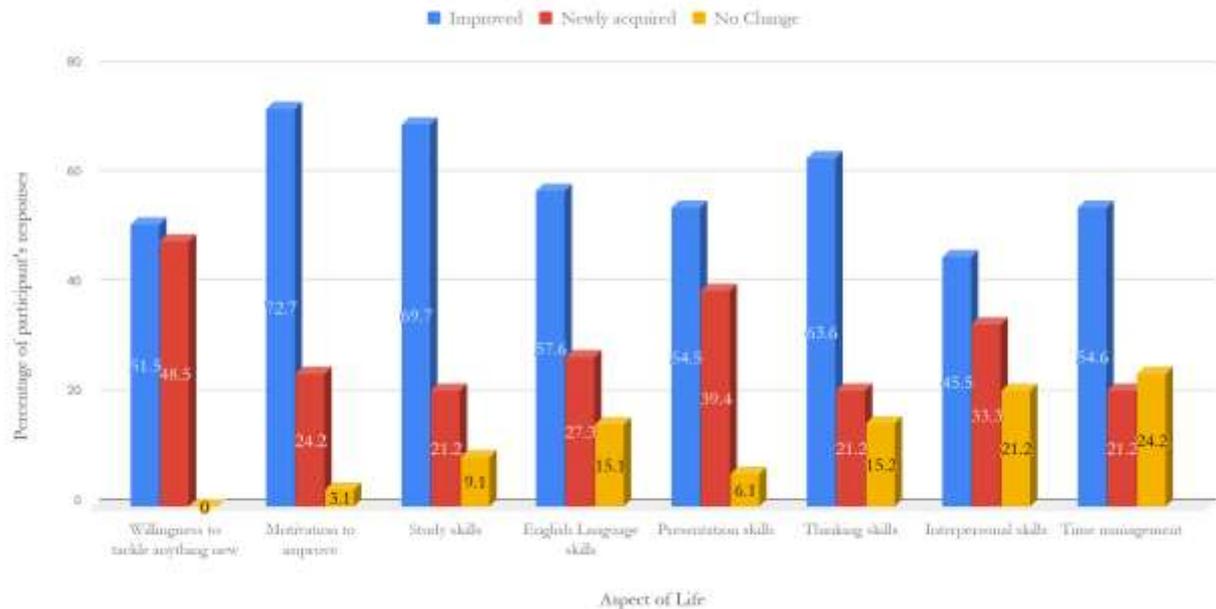


Figure 4: CES participant's response on pre and post skill status

Participant 2: *"In CES course I learn about the proper use of soft skill and developed the employability skills. I have also learn self-evaluation, how to design mind map, thinking out of the box and collaboration of group activities. It improved my presentation skill, situation managing skill, project planning activities and how to work with colleagues by sharing opinions."*

Participant 3: *"I would say, I am fortunate enough that I got the opportunity to participate in CES course. Though English is not our mother language but to ensure employability we need to be competent in English. CES course helped me to reduce my English fear and now I can express my thought easily. I do believe, if all the students get this opportunity it will help them to develop their skills."*

Most of the participants of this course has highly appreciated this course and recommended this course for others. Some participants even said that they are more organized in their work and they feel more confident while executing their tasks.

## 7. Limitation

As the students come from a background of traditional learning method it takes time for them to get used to this new method of learning. So the trainer must be patient enough to encourage the students to open up. Also they must show open minded attitude as their role is not of a lecturer but of a guide. Moreover, the trainer also faces the same type of difficulties if they are not familiarized with this technique. So they must be trained on how to conduct these classes in this method. Finally the course consists of 36 lessons, each designed to be conducted for 3 hours. That is a total of 108 hours, which is a long duration to cover.

## 8. Conclusion

From the illustrated analysis of the feedback provided by the participants we can conclude that the CES course has demonstrated effectiveness in cultivating the employability skills in the participants as it

incorporates metacognition in their study. As the course is built in such a manner that participants need to engage in the topic and find the solutions by themselves, it promotes their thinking ability and deductive reasoning. If a participant is patient enough to go through this course, they will be able to enhance their soft skills and use them in their every aspects of their life.

### **Acknowledgement**

The course was conducted by the faculties of Daffodil International University (DIU) for the students. We appreciate their cooperation.

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**Appendix  
Feedback on Changes after doing special  
Classes on Employability Skills**

Dear Student,

We the teachers would like to thank you for attending the classes on Employability Skills. Now, we would like to know from you whether the classes made any difference to your life. If yes, in what way? If not, what do you feel should have been done?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_; ID: \_\_\_\_\_; Semester: \_\_\_\_\_

How many classes were you able to attend? \_\_\_\_\_. Fill out the table below to your best understanding:

Aspect of Life	Change?	Details
Willingness to tackle anything new?	Previous to classes	
	After the classes	
Motivation to improve?	Previous to classes	
	After the classes	
Study skills?	Previous to classes	
	After the classes	
English Language skills?	Previous to classes	
	After the classes	
Presentation skills?	Previous to classes	
	After the classes	
Thinking skills?	Previous to classes	
	After the classes	
Interpersonal skills?	Previous to classes	
	After the classes	
Time management	Previous to classes	
	After the classes	

Would you recommend that DIU run these courses again?

If yes, why? \_\_\_\_\_, if no, why not?

Do you remember the name of your teachers? Names? \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher's impression of the student: