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Teaching Soft Skills Through Workplace Simulations in Classroom Settings

Doing More With Less

Soft skills, the employability skills that speak to a worker's interpersonal skills and character, rose to prominence in the early 1990s as a critical component of worker productivity with the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). Examples of soft skills are teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, and effective use of resources. Another commonly relied-upon soft skill is effective communication—not just around job-related tasks, but also around balancing work-life realities (e.g., caring for a young child, having a disability, past involvement with the justice system) that may affect workers in their efforts to obtain and sustain competitive employment. The premise that soft skills are more important than even the technical and general education backgrounds of workers has been confirmed by not only multiple research projects, but also the daily experiences of teachers, counselors, and job placement professionals working with youth and others who are entering the workforce for the first time. Today, the need to coach new hires about soft skills is an accepted fact among employers and those who prepare individuals for the workforce.

Soft skills are behaviors that must be internalized as a natural aspect of a person's repertoire of social skills and character attributes. Embedding within new workforce entrants the capacity to behave appropriately requires opportunities to experience and practice each new skill until they are well within each worker's comfort zone.

There are three common methods for creating opportunities for experiential learning of soft skills. One is interactive teaching, through which instructors facilitate exercises that provide opportunities for experience, practice, reinforcement, and reflection. A system of

“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, L. F. (2002). *Strategies and resources to develop workplace skills*. In W. J. Wilhelm, J. Logan, S. M. Smith, & L. F. Szul, *Meeting the demand: Teaching “soft” skills* (p. 34). Little Rock, AR: Delta Pi Epsilon. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED477252)

spiraling teachable moments that progresses to increasingly more difficult soft-skill tasks reinforces the learning while building the repertoire of skills. This approach requires skilled instructors and a well-designed curriculum, but has the disadvantage that the exercises, no matter how well designed, lack the authenticity of the real workplace.

The second method for teaching soft skills experientially is to use a coach in a workplace setting. On-the-job training work experience, internships, and work-study programs are all examples of teaching both hard (technical) and soft skills in the workplace in a manner that achieves optimal authenticity. The disadvantage of this method is the difficulty of finding employers who will provide both opportunities and a qualified coach to assure that learning takes precedence over workplace productivity.

The third method is to alter aspects of the classroom setting where general education or hard skills are being taught to workforce entrants so that the classroom simulates the workplace. This approach provides an authentic context for teaching and practicing soft skills that entails minimal costs and effort, affords the teacher control over the teaching agenda, and creates a classroom environment that benefits from the improved soft skills of its students. Classroom training is a common setting for teaching job-related skills throughout the U.S. Department of Labor's vast employment and training system. It is also the setting for teaching high school students throughout the nation's school systems.

This approach for teaching soft skills can be universally applied to have maximum impact on soft-skill deficits among our youth without new legislation, additional money, or new players. It just requires knowing how.

Achieve Workplace Authenticity in the Classroom Setting

Authenticity is both the greatest challenge and the most critical aspect of simulating a workplace environment in a classroom.

The simulation must be able to mimic a business-like purposefulness, confront students with a boss who enforces workplace rules, and provide incentives that substitute for paychecks. The authenticity of the simulation determines to what extent students can suspend disbelief and accept the simulation as real. That acceptance is the motivating

"School is your job. The classroom is your workplace. I am your supervisor."

force that moves students to play their roles as employees.

The best way to achieve workplace authenticity is to model the classroom simulation after a real business and replicate its workplace rules and cultural nuances. The soft skills valued the most by employers are those that match the employers' perception of a good work ethic. Work ethic or professionalism is really the workers' ability to adapt to employers' expectations for behavior, dress, responsibility, initiative, enthusiasm, and honesty. Although workplace rules vary somewhat from place to place, having an authentic guide to teach workplace rules is at the heart of a good simulation. For the instructor, an actual business model provides a strong foundation for creating the context for teaching soft skills that requires minimal effort.

Any business that is willing to provide the information will serve this purpose well, but the selection of a business that is aligned with the students' employment interests would enhance the simulation's motivational effects. Selecting an appropriate business model also means paying attention to feasibility issues. Can students manage the clothing requirements? Are the workplace rules compatible with those of the school? Is the business in good standing in the community?

A consultation with the business serving as a model should provide ideas for selecting the name of the simulated business, an important tangible feature of the simulation. The name should reflect the "business" of the class, so, for example, if the class is vocational in nature and focused on computer-aided design, the business name might be "CAD Unlimited." If the classroom teaches non-vocational topics, such as preparation for a general education diploma, the business name might be "GED Assist Inc."

Using guidance on workplace rules from the business model and with a name, the groundwork is laid for an "employee manual" where workplace rules are laid out. This manual should resemble as much as possible the real business's employee manual or handbook. Now the workplace simulation can be launched with a "new employee orientation" conducted by the new boss (teacher) of the new employees (students).

Dealing With the Boss

No workplace simulation is complete without the role of boss or supervisor. Authenticity

in playing these roles sets the stage for students to experiment with appropriate responses to workplace authority with some degree of safety. The necessary give and take between the worker role and the authority role generates genuine conflict that student/workers must learn how to resolve through the use of a number of soft skills (e.g., communication skills and conflict resolution skills).

Teachers can make critical contributions to a workplace simulation by recognizing small changes in their behavior that make their roles more authentic.

Workplace simulations require that teachers play the role of boss or supervisor. In business settings, there is usually a distinction between upper management bosses and front-line supervisors. Upper management bosses make the rules, determine salary, and make hiring and firing decisions. A front-line supervisor is less authoritative than upper management bosses and has greater responsibility for day-to-day supervision of the personnel who are directly involved in carrying out the work of the business. Supervisors don't make the rules, but are responsible for enforcing them. Supervisors also are responsible for workers' job performance and typically coach workers. Teachers or instructors may find the role of supervisor more similar to their roles as teachers for those reasons.

Personality and teaching style are also factors in determining how comfortable teachers will be in the role of supervisor. Teachers have to exercise discipline to remain constantly in their role to maintain authenticity. That will be an easier task if the chosen role is compatible with the teacher's values and teaching style.

Playing the role of supervisor requires some preparation. The business serving as the model can help by letting the teacher meet or observe one of its supervisors. At a minimum, the role requires that teachers meet the workplace rules for dress and deportment. The business model may represent a more conservative institution than the school does, or vice versa. Assuming one of the authoritative roles also may require shifting focus from informal relationships with students to more business-like relationships with workers. The latter are more distant and less nurturing.

The shift from informal to business-like relationships also will provide instructors with an opportunity to support students as they become aware of the issues that come up as they adapt to the workplace. For example, students/workers who have been involved in the court system may benefit from opportunities to practice disclosing their backgrounds during a simulated interview. Similarly, youth with disabilities may

not have considered how their disability affects their need for accommodations outside of the classroom.

Students with disabilities in secondary settings do not have to disclose their ability to receive services, but disclosure is required to secure “reasonable accommodations” in the workplace. In some instances where a person’s disability is apparent, disclosure of the disability may be less of an issue than understanding how to identify and discuss the types of accommodations needed to succeed in the workplace. A youth with a non-apparent disability may benefit from help deciding whether he needs accommodations to perform the tasks and practice disclosing the need for accommodations. The simulation will provide opportunities for instructors to help students explore and understand the advantages, disadvantages, and rights associated with disclosure in a particular setting. Additional resource materials on disability disclosure are available at the end of this document.

In summary, teachers can make critical contributions to a workplace simulation by recognizing the small changes in their behavior that make their roles more authentic.

Create Business-Like Purposefulness

One of the challenges in creating authentic workplace simulations in classroom settings is making the shift from an informal atmosphere typical of many classrooms of teenagers to the business-like purposefulness of a typical workplace. One way to make that shift and, at the same time, improve the self-management skills of students is to introduce students to planning tools such as day-planners. Day-planners (electronic or hard copy) are organizational tools that connect daily events to long-term goals. They are concrete tools for teaching abstract concepts of time management and come in a variety of forms that fit each student’s needs, interests, and expense accounts. There are the traditional bound paper planners and their modern electronic versions. Since computers are now common in most classrooms, students can also access a variety of planning tools that are embedded in most Windows and Apple operating systems. Planners can even be made by students as homework assignments. Planners are simply a means of linking months to weeks to days with an indexing system.

It can be challenging to make the shift from an informal atmosphere typical of classrooms to the business-like purposefulness of a typical workplace.

Teaching students how to use planning tools to organize their classroom work and personal agenda brings an air of purposefulness to a classroom that also has a hidden bonus. Day-planners work on the premise that major long-term accomplishments can be broken down into manageable, incremental tasks that can be aligned with a calendar in terms of monthly, weekly, and daily tasks. That leaves students with a daily “to-do” list. Teaching students to check off each daily item once achieved creates a highly effective self-motivational tool. Each checkmark is a self-congratulatory pat on the shoulder.

Provide Incentives for “Work” Performance

Positive reinforcement is a more powerful tool in changing behavior than negative reinforcement or punishment.

Shaping behavior toward specific standards requires a system of tangible incentives that can be applied with immediacy and consistency. Although praise from the teacher/supervisor is an important incentive, praise cannot be counted. For that reason, tangible incentives are needed. Also, authenticity of the workplace simulation benefits from an incentive that mimics the incentive of a paycheck and reinforces the practice of soft skills and student/worker productivity—the combination that determines whether workers hold their jobs or are fired. Such a system that meets all requirements must be affordable and simple to use.

One approach is to use tokens of various sizes, shapes or colors that correspond to the different soft skills. Any craft store offers a variety of items that can serve as tokens. Using a system of tokens as symbols of the different soft skills, the teacher/supervisor can bestow the tokens to reward appropriate behavior as he/she observes it. This simple action is efficient and communicates a form of approval that can be counted and is cumulative. Students can see how small changes add up over time.

The tokens are a simple mechanism that is tangible and, along with grades and other symbols of learning productivity, can be converted at the end of the week into a symbolic “paycheck.” Tokens, like real paychecks and cash, become representative symbols of monetary value but have the additional advantage of being easily bestowed as immediate rewards for specific behaviors.

All forms of money are simply representative symbols that can be easily replicated in the workplace simulation.

At the end of each week, the students convert the tokens awarded that week into a “paycheck” expressed as dollars. A chart that denotes the value for each token (some soft skills are harder to learn than others) allows students to calculate how much they are “earning.” The weekly exchange lets the teacher know which soft skills are being mastered.

Resources on Disclosure

- <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/topic/disability-disclosure>
- Advising Youth with Disabilities on Disclosure: Tips for Service Providers (attached)

Advising Youth with Disabilities on Disclosure: Tips for Service Providers

(Available online at <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/advising.htm>)

As a professional who provides services such as occupational skills training and job readiness training, you need to know how to help young people decide if they should share information about their disabilities. Disclosure is, by law, a personal decision that individuals with disabilities must make for themselves. As a person who works with youth, you may be in a position to assist youth with apparent and non-apparent disabilities to decide if, when, and how to disclose their disabilities. Understanding disclosure is especially important as youth transition from the K-12 education system to employment or postsecondary education systems. In this transition, they are leaving a system where they are entitled to receive services, and entering another where they may be eligible for reasonable accommodations if they make their needs known, and they are covered by the law.

In a disability context, “disclosure” means that people with disabilities share personal information about their disability for the specific purpose of receiving accommodations. There is no standardized form or set of requirements regarding what people must share about their disabilities. Thus, youth need to decide what, if anything, they want to reveal. Disclosure of a disability can also mean different things depending upon the type of disability. Youth with non-apparent disabilities must make the decision whether to disclose they have a disability. These youths should decide to whom they choose to disclose to and how much information to provide. Generally, youth with non-apparent disabilities find it most beneficial to disclose information only if they

need accommodations.

To receive accommodations at work or in postsecondary school, information about disability must be shared with the relevant authorities. An accommodation is an adjustment to an environment, which makes it possible for people with disabilities to participate equally. While youth with disabilities may be familiar with accommodations, as they may have used them in grade school, they may not be familiar with the art of disclosure. Unlike in grades K-12, it is a youth's responsibility to personally disclose his or her disability to someone who has the authority to provide accommodations.

Knowledge of the specific accommodations that youth will need in a given situation can help frame what disability information needs to be disclosed. If the youth does not require accommodations, it is generally not necessary to disclose the disability. Here are ways you can assist young people with determining whether disclosure is appropriate:

1. discuss the appropriateness of disclosing their disability in some situations and not in others (e.g. social, school, or work settings, or community activities);
2. evaluate the pros and cons with youth who are considering disclosure; and
3. encourage youth to practice effective communication of their disability, needs, skills, and abilities, with people whom they respect and trust, and who know their strengths well.

People who interact with youth with apparent disabilities may be aware of some aspects of the condition without being informed. Nonetheless, the young people must know how and what to say about their disability, and to whom. All youth should learn the skill of emphasizing their abilities and strengths; this especially applies to youth discussing their disability.

As you advise people with disabilities, remind them that it is not necessary to share everything about their disability and its effects. It is most important to provide information about:

1. how their disability impacts the capacity to learn and perform effectively; and
2. what environmental adjustments, supports, and services they will need in order to access, participate, and excel in their job, studies, community activities, etc.

It is important to remember that only youth with disabilities can decide whether or not to disclose their disability. It is your job to assist them in making an informed decision. As with any decision, disclosure has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, disability disclosure can afford opportunities for success because reasonable accommodations can be provided. Disclosure may also help the youth find strong support systems. On the other hand, it may be intimidating for youth to share personal information about their disabilities, where there are no assurances that the other person will react positively.

Also, what may seem a disadvantage in one setting or situation can be an advantage in another. Encourage young people to reconsider the disclosure question each time they encounter a new setting, situation, or set of circumstances.

The table below offers a few examples of the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure.

Advantages of Disclosure	Disadvantages of Disclosure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth will be able to receive reasonable accommodations to pursue work, school, or community activities more effectively. • It allows other professionals (educators, employment service providers, etc.) to assist the young people with learning new skills. • It provides legal protection against discrimination (as specified in the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act). • It can improve a youth’s self-image by developing self-advocacy skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It can lead to the experience of exclusion or being treated differently than others. • It can lead to being viewed as needy, not self-sufficient, or unable to perform on par with peers. • It can cause people to overlook youth with disabilities for a job, team, group, or organization. • It can be difficult and embarrassing. <p>Note: It may be helpful to make the youth aware that if he or she experiences discrimination because of the disclosure, he or she may have a right to file a complaint under the Americans with Disabilities Act or the Rehabilitation Act.</p>

Resources

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. (2005). The 411 on disability disclosure: A workbook for youth with disabilities. Available [Online] at: http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_&_Publications/411.html