

Strategies for Teaching Soft Skills in a Graphic Communications Classroom

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Abstract

The primary goal of this research is to provide graphic communications educators with a variety of educational approaches, as well as inspire new, creative approaches regarding the implementation of soft skills competencies into the graphic communications curriculum.

The framework for this study is based on a recent research project conducted by Bridges (2020) on the most needed competencies for higher education graphic communications programs. Experts overwhelmingly identified soft skills as the most needed competencies for students upon entering the graphic communications workforce.

This paper will discuss the importance of soft skills and why their inclusion in a higher education graphics curriculum is so vital. This will be followed by an examination of current teaching strategies from related disciplines and explore how those fields are incorporating soft skills into the classroom. Findings from a focus group comprised of graphic communications educators at both the secondary and post-secondary levels will also be addressed. Participants of the focus group were first prompted to address if and how soft skills are presented to students in lecture content. The discussion then moved to more detailed strategies for integrating soft skills into small-scale assignments and larger project-based assignments. Finally, participants were asked to share any additional classroom-related tasks where soft skills can be included.

1. Introduction

A recent research study entitled Competencies and Tools of Higher Education Graphic Communications Programs (Bridges, 2020) found that soft skills were the most desired competencies for students entering the graphic communications industry, as identified by graphic communications educators and industry professionals. The study utilized a modified Delphi Technique with four rounds of survey questions. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The survey results from that study found that top-ranking competencies included critical thinking skills, communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving and analytical thinking skills, and business and personal ethics. Interestingly, another study on identifying 21st century

graphic design skills (Bridges, 2016) had similar findings. Three of the 21st century skills found to be most needed in effective university-level graphic design programs were exhibiting interpersonal skills; writing clearly, concisely, correctly; and effectively present, which are all considered to be soft skills.

Currently, a wide range of educational research regarding soft skills exists. Researchers overwhelmingly argue that soft skills can, in fact, be taught in the classroom. The challenge and duty of educators, then, is to determine how best to do that. The purpose of this study is to identify potential teaching strategies focusing on soft skills to incorporate into graphic com-

munications classrooms. Though this research focuses primarily on the importance of soft skills from an educator's perspective, graphic communications industry professionals have also expressed a need for these skills before students enter the workforce. In the previously mentioned 2020 (Bridges) study, 21 of 34 participants were industry professionals. Some soft skills comments related to communication and teamwork from industry professionals included, "We routinely train for soft skills. Graduates are not using salutations, closings in emails. They often send shortened replies that look like texts and avoid calling clients directly" and "When people go into the workforce, they have to be able to work in groups. If they cannot do that, it doesn't matter what their skills are." This demonstrates that the need for more soft skills-related education in graphic communications is supported by educators and industry professionals alike.

1.1 Importance of Soft Skills in Education

In general, soft skills are defined as a combination of interpersonal and social skills (Dixon et al., 2010). These abilities enable individuals to interact "effectively and harmoniously" with others (Oxford Languages, n.d). In the workplace, soft skills complement hard skills, which refer to a person's knowledge and occupational skills (Kenton, nd). In graphic communications specifically, this is especially important as many students entering the field have considerable technical skills. Table 1, created by Schulz (2008), offers some examples of traits that are considered to be soft skills. This is not a complete list, and some traits may differ based on the specific area.

Table 1 Soft Skills Traits

Communication skills	Responsibility
Critical and structural thinking	Etiquette and good manners
Problem solving skills	Courtesy
Creativity	Self-esteem
Teamwork capability	Sociability
Negotiating skills	Integrity/Honesty
Self management	Empathy
Time management	Work ethic
Conflict management	Project management
Cultural awareness	Business management
Common knowledge	

Schulz, B. (2008). The importance of soft skills: Education beyond academic knowledge. *Nawa Journal of Communication*, 2(1), pp.146-154.

Soft skills are important in education for a number of reasons. One important factor is that graduating students are entering one of the strongest job markets in several years (Rivera, 2022). This will allow students to be selective in the types of positions and roles they accept within a company. Mastery of soft skills leads to a greater likelihood of advancement within a given company or additional career opportunities that may not otherwise be possible (Schulz, 2008). According to Nealy (2005) several studies have found that soft skills were the top skill that business and industry look for in employees. Soft skills will also give students a much-needed competitive edge when entering the industry. In addition, some studies have suggested that currently employers are dissatisfied with the "lack of academic preparedness" from recent graduates (Nealy, 2005). For example,

students not having specific skills listed in a particular job description (Hansen, 2021). This exemplifies the need to explore various teaching and classroom practices where soft skills can be emphasized.

1.2 Strategies from Other Disciplines

To better understand how soft skills can be taught, it was important to examine how other academic disciplines were implementing teaching strategies targeting soft skills. Shuman, Besterfield-Sacre, and McGourty (2005) argue that soft skills can easily be incorporated into a broad range of classrooms and disciplines. Thus, a variety of disciplines, both closely related and very different from graphic communications, were examined in this research. The areas included Business and Management, Art, Education, Computer Science, Science, and Technology.

Some broad strategies commonly mentioned were active teaching (engaging students as active participants in their learning during class) and project-based learning (Nealy, 2005). Active learning promotes a broader knowledge base as well as interpersonal skills such as communication, problem solving, and teamwork (Nealy, 2005). According to Lucas (1997) active learning is a "simulation or game approach" consisting of the following four features: a search for meaning and understanding, a focus on student responsibility, a concern with skills and knowledge, and a curriculum approach that leads beyond graduation to a wider career and social setting. Project-based learning is a student-centered teaching approach where students gain knowledge of a particular subject through projects. This type of learning puts much of the learning responsibility onto the students and the teacher takes on more of a

facilitator role (Aristidou, 2020). Specific active learning and project-based learning activities included self-assessment and reflection, such as class critiques; online portfolios; service-learning projects, such as getting students actively involved in the community, which encourages communication and participation with groups they may not otherwise interact with; mentoring, which encourages communication; dining etiquette; mock interviews; ethical awareness games, which encourages goals more than just winning; round table discussions; role playing; and encouraging extra-curricular activities for class credit. In addition, some disciplines are developing specific soft-skills courses, which are added to department curriculum requirements (Majid et al, 2012).

Business and science disciplines are similar in some ways to the graphic communications field. In business, work-based learning programs are used as ways to connect work to the classroom. The rationale behind this strategy is that if students work repeatedly under "coaches" or expert teachers the student will achieve fluency in soft skills (Wilhelm et al, 2002). According to Wilhelm (2002), "Realistic activities incorporated into the curriculum afford an opportunity to gain workplace readiness, provide stimulating and engaging activities, and engage students in the learning process" (p.37). Some other specific teaching strategies from business include designing a web page to encourage communication and teamwork, job shadowing to gain experience in oral and written communication, and case studies to strengthen problem solving abilities (Wilhelm et al, 2002).

In the sciences, educators recommend integrated learning as the most effective means for teaching soft skills. Integration allows students

to develop soft skills while simultaneously focusing on course learning objectives (Susilawati et al, 2020). Another suggested strategy was to develop activities in the social community. This gives students the opportunity to interact with others while building communication skills, teamwork, and integrity (Susilawati et al, 2020). Upon entering the industry, students will almost certainly be required to interact and work with others, while also being expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner. Educators in the sciences also view modeling as an effective teaching approach because the teacher essentially serves as a role model for students giving them a firsthand example of the application of soft skills (Susilawati et al, 2020).

2. Methods

This study utilized a focus group to collect educator input regarding effective soft skills teaching strategies. Focus group interviews are typically used to gather views from specific people. It involves collecting data through group interviews with a small number of participants (Creswell, 2012). The researcher develops a small number of general questions and elicits responses from the participants. Responses are then recorded, oftentimes through audio or video recording or notetaking. In general, each participant is encouraged to speak and take turns speaking. Some advantages of focus group interviewing include providing for interaction among participants, allowing for the collection of extensive data, and encouraging participation from all individuals in the group (Krueger, 1994). Some disadvantages or challenges to focus group interviewing include the interviewer can sometimes lack control over the discussion, difficulty in taking notes due to the ongoing conversation, and the tendency

for some participants to dominate the discussion (Creswell, 2012). Focus group interviewing allows for the collection of qualitative data, and in some instances, quantitative data as well. This research data utilized a focus group interview where qualitative data were collected and recorded via notetaking by the researcher.

2.1 Participants

The focus group was conducted as a panel session at the Summer 2022 Graphic Communications Education Association Annual Conference. Participants included both retired and current educators from secondary and postsecondary levels. All were registered attendees at the GCEA conference. There were 18 educators that participated in the discussion, and approximately 10 others that sat in on the focus group as observers. Participants were from various geographic locations in the United States and Canada and included a wide range of ages. The focus group was given a 30-minute panel session time slot; however, the focus group lasted roughly 45 minutes.

2.2 Procedures

Participants of the focus group were first provided with an informed consent (Appendix A), and then given some background and context regarding the need for the study. The group was given short instructions regarding how the focus group would be conducted. As previously mentioned, focus group discussions can oftentimes be difficult for the researcher to record via notetaking. To address this concern, it was determined that it would be beneficial for each participant to provide written responses first for each question and then discuss orally. Participants were asked the following focus group questions:

1. How do you integrate soft skills into your classroom lecture content? Give specific examples.,
2. How do you integrate soft skills into small-scale assignments and major projects? Give specific examples.,
3. Are there any other specific classroom-related activities where soft skills can be included? Give specific examples.

Educators were given questions one at a time and instructed to take approximately 5 minutes to record their response for the question, followed by an approximately 10-minute discussion.

3. Results

3.1 Lecture Content

Traditional classroom lectures are one method for helping students develop soft skills. Schulz (2008) stated, "...students participating in a lecture with the aim of learning a hard skill will inevitably and unconsciously practice a range of soft skills. This comes very close to an ideal way of lecturing" (p.152). Question one asked participants to address how they incorporate soft skills into lecture content. Many participants discussed first day of class content, such as going over the syllabus and providing a course overview. One educator mentioned giving students scenarios that they can relate to in order to encourage more professional behavior. Another participant discussed asking students to talk about what they think makes a successful course and what they would consider a successful student to look like. A participant also mentioned asking students to talk about their specific goals for the course, and what their expectations are from the instructor. One other educator discussed engaging

in get-to-know-you questions to help students feel more comfortable with and begin to develop a rapport with the instructor. Also discussed were brainstorming exercises and active discussion during lectures, where the instructor asks the students questions. Another educator mentioned utilizing lecture discussion to highlight how to make logical choices and decisions. Many of these examples demonstrate a use of the integrated learning concept which allows students to acquire soft skills while also focusing on course learning objectives. Table 2 provides a synopsis of the specific lecture content example with the soft skill that can be highlighted. The soft skills are based off the top five skills from Bridges 2020 study on graphic communications competencies.

Table 2 Soft Skills and Teaching Strategies in Lecture Content

	Critical thinking	Communication	Team-work	Problem solving	Business/ personal ethics
Real-world scenario discussion	X	X		X	X
What makes a successful course/ student	X	X			X
Goals for the course	X	X			
Instructor expectations		X			X
Get to know you questions		X			
Brainstorming/ Active discussions	X	X	X	X	
Discussion on making logical choices and decisions	X	X		X	

X = soft skill emphasized in lecture content

3.2 Small-scale Assignments and Major Projects

Small-scale assignments and major projects are common teaching strategies used to help students develop and reinforce their use of soft skills, and the concept is often referred to as project-based learning. Participants were asked to discuss how they integrate soft skills into these types of course activities. One suggested strategy regarding the small-scale assignment included doing a computer demonstration in a particular application and then asking students to do the same action in a different way than demonstrated. One example is showing students how to retouch a photo in Adobe Photo-

shop and then asking them to explore and find a different method to achieve the same result. The participant mentioned that this encourages continual problem solving. Another participant discussed requiring students to explain a process as they complete it. An example of this would be asking students to explain the steps to prepare a screen for screen printing. Impromptu interviews were also discussed as a strategy for small-scale assignments. In an estimating course, the instructor could have the students call a print company to request a quote for a job, rather than emailing. Another strategy related to major projects was to make mistakes on purpose and have the students troubleshoot and figure out how to address the problem. An example would be causing some-

thing to go wrong on a flexography press and asking the students to determine what the issue is and how to fix it. Some other general examples included scaffolding or benchmarking in assignments and projects (part one is due this date, part two this date, and so on), giving assignment constraints as though they were working for a particular client with a specific budget, group work and teamwork, and peer reviews, either written or verbal. Another example discussed by an educator regarding scaffolding in a major project was to have the students write down a specific process through a technical report, demonstrate the process and address how it could be improved, and finally master the process via peer review and proofing checks. Many of these activities requires the student to take an active role in the learning process, and places much of the responsibility on the student with the educator predominantly serving as a facilitator. Table 3 lists the project example with the soft skill that is integrated into the assignment.

Table 3 Soft Skills and Teaching Strategies in Small-scale Assignments and Major Projects

	Critical thinking	Communication	Team-work	Problem solving	Business/ personal ethics
Computer demo rework				X	
Verbal process explanation	X	X		X	
Impromptu interviews		X		X	
Troubleshooting problems	X			X	
Scaffolding	X			X	
Peer reviews		X	X		
Assignment constraints	X			X	

X = soft skill emphasized in lecture content

3.3 Soft Skills in Other Areas

Within the learning environment, educators can also utilize more non-traditional activities to reinforce the development of soft skills. Question three asked participants to discuss any other specific classroom-related tasks where soft skills can be emphasized. One participant stated “I take soft skills and give a 10% grade each week for each student. I track communication, problem solving, attendance, professionalism, participation/teamwork, and time management. I then give them feedback and they can be aware of their soft skills.” Another educator discussed having each student reflect on their own soft skills throughout the semester. An example of this practice would be to ask students each week to write down the soft skill(s) they focused on that week and how that

skill was highlighted. Another suggestion was to have the entire class create a list of important soft skills and then have the students develop project and assignment ideas that emphasize what they identified. One participant mentioned using a WHAT grade at the end of every term assessing work habits, attitude, and trustworthiness. Finally, it was suggested to have the students create their own personal soft skills list that they will work on throughout the term, and then evaluate whether they were successful in developing those skills. These strategies frequently require additional effort on the part of the instructor but can lead to valuable learning experiences for the students. Table 4 provides other classroom-related activities that focus on all or almost all of the top-five soft skills and can be evaluated throughout the course

Table 3 Soft Skills and Teaching Strategies in Small-scale Assignments and Major Projects

	Critical thinking	Communication	Team-work	Problem solving	Business/ personal ethics
Tracking soft skills and giving feedback	X	X	X	X	X
Self-reflection		X			
Student developed assignments emphasizing soft skills	X	X	X	X	X
WHAT grade	X	X	X	X	X
Student developed soft skills set	X	X	X	X	X

X = soft skill emphasized in lecture content

4. Discussion

The focus group revealed similar teaching strategies to those mentioned in other disciplines. Active learning and project-based learning were themes addressed during the discussion. Participants also gave specific examples relevant to the graphic communications field. Upon analyzing the results from the discussion, another overarching theme that arose from the focus group interview was the idea of student ownership. This encompasses ownership of the course, assignments, course goals, and course outcomes. Participants repeatedly discussed

the educational value in placing the responsibility of acquiring soft skills into the hands of the students. The intent is that if students help develop the course content and assessment, this will lead to more of an investment in the course and a more beneficial learning experience. The educator then must create a classroom atmosphere that fosters a sense of student responsibility, which in turn helps the students make a more attainable investment in the class. This indeed takes time to develop and assess how effectively students are acquiring soft skills, in addition to the other learning goals within a given course. If the educator is

willing to make the investment, the result will lead to students being better prepared to enter the graphic communications industry, as well as more equipped to advance further in their careers.

An encouraging observation from the focus group was the overall enthusiasm and willingness to share among participants. This demonstrated that educators are interested in improving their teaching strategies and are willing to make adjustments in their teaching in order to focus more on the development of soft skills in student learning. Participants were very active throughout the discussion, and it was clear that as more educators shared what they were doing in the classroom, it sparked ideas from other educators in the room which led to a livelier discussion. At the conclusion of the focus group, all educators had participated and several mentioned how helpful the process had been in generating new ideas and teaching strategies that could be implemented in the classroom. This was the overall goal of the focus group interview, to inspire and share in order to help educators develop and implement strategies to improve student learning in the classroom. These findings should help those educators who are skeptical or reluctant to incorporate soft skills into their courses feel more comfortable doing so, and the ideas generated from the focus group can serve as a starting point for implementing assignments and exercises that place an emphasis on soft skill development.

Based on the theme that arose from the focus group regarding student ownership, it would be beneficial to conduct a study assessing the importance of soft skills in education utilizing students as the participants. A 2012 study (Majid et al.) found that a majority of students

believed that soft skills were important for social interaction and career advancement. The top five most valuable skills as identified by students were: teamwork and collaboration, decision-making, problem-solving, time management and critical thinking (Majid et al., 2012). This finding is consistent with skills identified by graphic communications educators and industry professionals. Future studies focusing on the student perspective regarding how necessary and crucial soft skills are to them and their future success in graphic communications would provide some valuable insights. In addition, it would be helpful to get student ideas regarding course content that would aide in their development of soft skills.

Finally, as educators continue to develop and refine teaching strategies focusing on soft skills, it will be important to determine how effective the strategies are. Additional studies will need to be conducted assessing the impact on student learning and preparedness for the graphic communications field. Partnering with graphic communications industries in order to assess soft skill implementation during student internships and full-time employment and its effects on career readiness would provide valuable data in assessing teaching effectiveness. Both student and employer feedback could be collected via questionnaires and/or interviews. Pre and posttests are also useful measures of student learning in the classroom. These would be relatively simple to incorporate into any graphic communications course to assess soft skills. One such example is a pre and post survey analyzing written communication. The Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test is a widely used instrument that measures the level and type of anxiety students have around writing (ECU, 2020). The pretest would be used as an initial measure, followed by a series of

writing assignments given throughout the semester/year, concluding with a posttest to determine if any improvement or reduction in anxiety has been achieved. This is especially beneficial with first-year or younger students who do not have a great deal of experience with writing, especially in the graphic communications field where technical writing is emphasized. Another example where a pre and posttest could be used to measure problem solving and critical thinking is for the instructor to develop a checklist for a specific printing process and observe students' progression over time in terms of on-press work, maintenance, and troubleshooting. Finally verbal communication can also be assessed with a pretest and posttest. Presentations are an excellent means for measuring improvement in speaking. Teachers could utilize previously developed tests or create one more specific to the subject area. For example, in an introductory design course each student could give a brief presentation on what design means to them, and at the conclusion of the semester give a presentation on the same topic. Educators could analyze growth in terms of correct terminology usage, confidence, and delivery, among several other criteria.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that many educators recognize the need for incorporating soft skills teaching strategies into the classroom. However, some remain skeptic of the benefit and/or do not see the value in taking the time to assist students in developing these skills. This is evidenced by feedback received from employers who state that students are underprepared in this area. The results of this research reinforce the conclusion that soft skills can be taught, and in fact, are being taught by graphic communications educators. Based on research and

feedback from industry professionals, many disciplines are now seeing the necessity and value in their inclusion into courses. Implementing the teaching strategies mentioned in this study will require time, preparation, and hard work on the part of the educator. However, it is worth the investment if student learning and preparedness are improved. Educators will need to continue to be innovative, creative, and purposeful in the creation of course content and assessment in order to ensure that the soft skills experts have determined to be vital for success, are being emphasized in the classroom.

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