

Soft Skills and Third Space Thinking

Introduction

On the opening summer day of the Third Space Youth Institute in 2019, sixty children of migrant families traveled from the fruit fields of Los Angeles and Riverside counties for their first visit to a college campus. They spent four days residing in USC dormitories while learning about and developing soft skills; the skills necessary for their success in tomorrow's economy.

Unbeknownst to us, 30 parents decided to accompany their kids, taking off a day from work to do so. When we asked these parents on that first day in the auditorium how they arrived at this decision, one father rose from his seat and told us forcefully, "Every day I rise at 4:30 a.m. to go to dusty fields to pick vegetables and fruit, and I sweat a lot. I don't want my son to go through what I have to. And if you can help him, I will be satisfied."

The following morning, our USC student resident assistants, most of whom were born into similar circumstances as fellow first-generation students of color, went to the student participants' dorm rooms at 6:30 a.m. to wake them up and get them ready for class. When they arrived at the dorm, the students were already dressed and ready with their backpacks on. As some students explained, "We are used to getting up at 4:30 to go to the fields with our parents to work a couple of hours before going to school." Needless to say, the eagerness for learning and opportunity was palpable from our student participants and their parents.

As classes began, many students shyly stood up, often looking down as they mumbled their introductions in the classroom. After just a few days of hands-on, active learning experiences that required both individual reflection and group collaboration, students' soft skills abilities were noticeably improved. On the fourth and final day, student groups stood up confidently to describe their community projects with pride. They assembled into their collaborative workgroups and told one another how they were using soft skills to solve community problems. By the end of the Third Space Youth Institute, students could explain why they were committed to going to college and how they planned to help their families and communities by using their new ideas and skills.

The Soft Skills Gap

One of the most important issues in today's transition from an Industrial Society to a Post-Industrial Society is the skyrocketing demand for a radically new mix of workplace skills. A significant share of these new jobs will be in the category known as interactive skills, people skills, or soft skills. Whatever we call them, experts agree we need individuals with a lot of these skills, and quickly. Companies need to recruit, develop, and scale-up pipelines of employees with soft skills to remain competitive. The McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) (2018) notes that industries have a stronger sense of how to train and retrain employees for STEM skills, but far less understanding of how to impart soft skills related to communication, management, and

critical thinking. They go on to suggest that the growing need for professionals with soft skills is not only a problem for the industry but also a concern for educational, credentialing institutions. Valued by employers across industries and sectors, the Wall Street Journal found that of the 900 executives they surveyed, 92% rated soft skills as equally important or more important than technical skills and 89% expressed having a very or somewhat difficult time finding employees with adequate soft skills (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2017). Educational institutions are critiqued for not considering or prioritizing soft skills development. Part of the challenge comes from concerns across fields that soft skills cannot be defined, taught, measured, or applied.

Over the past five years, the team at USC Annenberg's Center for Third Space Thinking has been doing exactly those four tasks in a wide variety of contexts in our collective effort to put hard edges on soft skills. We operate within and across three distinct but interrelated clusters: high schools, universities, and corporations. In each cluster we applied our unique soft skills model, which we term Third Space Thinking and define its five attributes in detail in the following section, to each cluster while carefully tailoring our approach to meet the specific needs and expectations of our learners.

In the corporate sector which is where our work began, our team teaches the Third Space Thinking model through executive education training for companies such as IBM, Google, United Airlines, Alibaba, Western Union, AECOM, and various start-ups. We have also worked with large non-profits and foundations. In the college cluster, we have taught hundreds of undergraduates and graduate students alike through Third Space Thinking courses. In the third high school cluster, we have taught soft skills to youth from underserved communities, the sons and daughters of migrant workers in Southern California, as well as students attending urban high schools. Complementing the specialized, soft skills content is our pedagogical approach which draws heavily on active learning techniques aligned with the foundations of social and emotional learning (SEL) to ensure that our various program participants experience personal and interpersonal development.

Contrary to the beliefs of many, we propose that we can, in fact, **define, teach, measure, and apply** soft skills. This paper details the processes, successes, and challenges we experienced along the way, and the work that remains to be done in the space of soft skills development.

Defining Soft Skills

When discussed in the public sphere, soft skills are often mentioned in comparison to hard skills, also known as high knowledge technical skillsets that are more easily taught and measured in educational and working environments. The underlying assumption is that once an individual can show deep knowledge of and proficiency in a particular knowledge domain, they are capable of practicing the hard skill more formally (Chell & Athayde, 2017). Alternatively, soft skills

reference behaviors that can be acquired through experience. Dominant media often falsely labels these abilities as conceptually easier to understand and develop than hard skills.

Though public media across disciplines and within fields quibble over the particular definitions, extant literature describes soft skills as traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that tend to be valued in educational and professional environments (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Additionally, one's ability to demonstrate skills such as interpersonal relations, self-management, teamwork, and creating problem-solving also speak to their soft skills abilities across a range of social-emotional and professional domains (Rigden, 2019; Russell, et al., 2005). Ultimately, the process for attaining and strengthening soft skills require knowledge of self as well as knowledge of how to interact and connect with others through context-dependent opportunities for practice, reflection, and improvement.

Our organization, the Center for Third Space Thinking, has conducted extensive research in this space inspired by our early commitment to define soft skills across disciplines. As explored in the white paper we produced, "[One-Trillion Dollar Global Talent Gap](#)," the divide between the talents companies currently have and those they require in the impending future are growing. In our collective effort to put hard edges on soft skills, we conducted a study based on information gathered from two phases of data collection. In phase 1, we conducted in-person interviews with 75 senior executives that spanned across a range of varying sectors. Initial analysis indicated that there were five talent attributes referenced throughout these interviews. To test the validity of these phase 1 insights, we then tested these attributes against the larger Korn-Ferry database which included data from 1,847 executives in engineering, business, and communication fields. We confirmed and refined these five **ACT-IT** attributes which comprise what we call Third Space Thinking (TST), the essential skills needed in educational spaces and workplaces of the future. These five core attributes include (1) adaptability, (2) cultural competency, (3) empathy, (4) intellectual curiosity, and (5) 360 - degree thinking.

Adaptability refers to one's ability to demonstrate mental agility and remain comfortable with ambiguous, unstructured environments and flexible in the face of continual change. This core attribute also speaks to an individual's willingness to adjust their thinking and approach in response to new, unexpected, or changing conditions and information. The second attribute, cultural competency, references how one demonstrates emotional and cross-cultural intelligence as well as their capabilities working inclusively, respectfully, and effectively across cultures or organizations that have different values, norms, customs, and language or terminology. Those with growing cultural competence demonstrate broad, cross-functional thinking, shunning the limitations of structural, geographic, departmental, or other organizational boundaries. Next, empathy depends upon how capable a person is of understanding and recognizing others' needs, goals, feelings, priorities, and perspectives by engaging in active listening and focusing on reflective responses that clarify and strengthen dialogue. Developing this attribute also requires

that the individual is able to effectively interpret others' viewpoints and integrate these insights into more effective approaches for problem-solving and need fulfillment. The fourth attribute, intellectual curiosity, include those who possess a hunger for new knowledge, information, and understanding that fuels ever-higher levels of learning and performance. They engage in novel opportunities and experiences, strive for measurable growth, and demonstrate emotional intelligence and savvy. The final core competency, 360 - degree thinking, takes a holistic, multi-dimensional, analytical approach to problem-solving. Individuals who strive to master this competency are able to convert information into insights, infer implications from data, extrapolate from data to real-world applications, and engage in sense-making by connecting the dots across these stages of inquiry. Collectively, these core attributes specify the essential soft skills needed in today's classrooms and places of work, as well as the multitude of spaces in between to foster broader societal goals of interpersonal understanding, community empowerment, and leadership development.

Teaching Soft Skills

Building upon the five core attributes described above, our team aimed to construct an approach to teaching the soft skills that employers described as a growing need across industries. Through this process, we learned that K-12 educators and policy-makers were also concerned about supporting students in their development of soft skills, both as a means for strengthening how they understand themselves and others, as well as an opportunity to prepare graduates for the realities of college and future careers (Wagenheim, 2016). In higher education at the undergraduate level, business and STEM preparation programs have been critiqued, in particular, for their inability to integrate soft skill development into courses and throughout curricula, even though employers increasingly desire and expect these skills.

Recent literature has started to offer not only experimental studies that show the importance and value of soft skills (Connolly & Reinicke, 2017), but also provide pedagogical strategies (Connolly & Reinicke, 2017), course assignments (Pulko & Parikh, 2003), and evaluation tools for student learning (Russell, et al., 2005). Some studies have explored integrating soft skills teaching into service-learning and capstone courses in computer science and information systems programs at the undergraduate level (Carter, 2011; Russell, Russell, & Tastle, 2005). Others have presented skill development for secondary students through teaching internships related to engineering (Rigden, 2019). Extant studies have also emphasized the importance of active learning (Connolly & Reinicke, 2017), explored in greater detail in a later section, and suggest that effective approaches include activities such as guest speaker presentations (Anthony & Garner, 2016) and teaching through facilitation rather than lecturing (Pulko & Parikh, 2003).

To contribute to understanding how soft skills can be taught, the Center for Third Space Thinking has created a pedagogical teaching model informed by both research and early learning experiences. As a result, there are three key elements that inform how the Center approaches

teaching soft skills including (1) alignment with the goals of social and emotional learning (SEL), (2) facilitation of active learning practices that support classroom engagement, and (3) ultimately empowering participants with the ACE-IT, soft skills competencies.

Social and Emotional Learning

With growing concerns about character education and the mental health of the public, especially increasing rates of anxiety and depression among teenagers in particular, social and emotional learning (SEL) is now a major topic of conversation in and beyond education (Tate, 2019). SEL is defined as, “the competencies that underscore our ability to be available to learn and available to teach” (Tate, 2019) as well as “the critical role of positive relationships and emotional connections in the learning process [that] helps students develop a range of skills they need for school and life” (California Department of Education, 2019). Relatedly, much of SEL work comes out of emotional intelligence science (Tate, 2019; Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2013).

As a result of extensive SEL research and programs, state and local entities have started to embrace the charge to support students’ development in the holistic ways that SEL requires. For example, California’s Department of Education has an initiative focused on increasing the presence of SEL across districts and schools. The state departments’ guiding principles include (1) adopt whole child development as the goal of education, (2) commit to equity, (3) build capacity, (4) partner with families and communities, and (5) learn and improve. In our local context, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has established four competencies as the focus for their SEL initiatives: (1) growth mindset, (2) self-efficacy, (3) self-management, and (4) social awareness (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2019). Though the department and the district frame the importance of SEL as connected to academic achievement, the Center for Third Space Thinking has committed to advocating for the importance of SEL broadly, and soft skills in particular, as an integral means of preparation for college and future careers. Though SEL informs the foundation for *why* we teach soft skills, active learning describes *how* we teach our various program participants to acquire and develop their ACE-IT, soft skill attributes.

Active Learning

“Active learning,” often associated with the “flipped classroom approach,” refers to moving traditional content, such as background reading, to work that students do at home which leaves space for engaging higher-order learning during class meetings through instructor facilitation. Active learning has been defined as when “students engage with the material, participate in the class, and collaborate with each other” (Stanford Teaching Commons, 2019) as well as “any instructional method that actively engages students in the learning process while in the classroom” (Crimmins & Midkiff, 2017). Authors have described active learning activities and approaches as inclusive of group problem solving, problem-based learning, and studio format

classrooms (Crimmins & Midkiff, 2017). Additionally, there has been extensive research that active learning practices are associated with stronger learning outcomes (Crimmins & Midkiff, 2017; Freeman, et al., 2014) as well as improved cognitive outcomes (Michel, Cater, & Varela, 2009). Online resources that support college and university faculty, as well as graduate student instructors, offer active learning and associated techniques as best-practice teaching strategies (GSI Teaching & Resource Center, 2019; Stanford Teaching Commons, 2019).

The Challenges and Successes of Teaching Soft Skills

We faced many institutional challenges in our initial efforts to translate our executive education work to college undergraduates. We faced skepticism from faculty, administrators and even students who were often in one of two groups, those who challenged the rigor of soft skills courses and instruction and those who challenged claimed that the work was already being done. These difficulties were exacerbated given the siloed nature of the institution and the reticence of higher education structures to change. We learned with time that we needed to develop buy-in from constituents across the university and within respective departments through more personalized discussions about the merits of and possibilities of balancing rigor with relevance by offering soft skills development to students that were field and discipline-specific. We also had to call attention to the need for learning environments with an explicit and specific emphasis on soft skills because we knew that there continued to be a curricular void in this area.

As it relates to teaching, practicing, and ultimately learning soft skills, the center's approach is very experiential and active rather than lecture-based. Formal teaching practices, like lectures, can be limited to using the "banking model of education" which has been critiqued as ineffective. "Banking" refers to Paulo Freire's (2005) assessment of limited approaches to teaching where students store information rather than engage in learning that fosters critical thinking and critical consciousness. In the beginning, the more we taught soft skills, the more aware we became of the differences between teaching and learning cognitive-based skills, such as mathematics and science, compared to teaching and learning non-cognitive attributes. These differences emerged most clearly when we taught college students, likely because we worked with them for 15 weeks over the course of a full semester, instead of programming that was limited to a week or a few days. Building people's capacities for empathy or curiosity while only relying on classroom lectures or discussions quickly proved inadequate.

When we introduced learning groups to the soft skills, ACE-IT attributes by using more conventional techniques, like role-playing, there was some engagement with the attributes we were teaching as seen through students' descriptions of the skills they gained. Yet, their development seemed to lack depth. While students learned the terms and features of the core attributes associated with our soft skills approach, when we experimented with a wider range of active learning techniques, professors concluded the students were more deeply engaged with,

and more likely to understand, the depth of the meanings of the exercises and their connection to ACE-IT behaviors. Students began linking intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities by building upon the importance of self-awareness and their awareness of others' emotional states and communication styles. Observationally, their engagement grew. These insights led us to adopt a blended pedagogical approach to teaching soft skills, relying both on traditional lectures, reading assignments, and written reports as well as more engaging activities, projects, and presentations. Through this process, students acquired and sharpened their formal definitions, perspectives, and experiences related to the five core ACE-IT principles.

Future Work for Teaching Soft Skills

The Center for Third Space Thinking utilizes established best practices by providing participants with scaffolded lessons offered through a practice-oriented approach to learning. By focusing on personal reflection as well as interpersonal communication, the assignments engage students to be active participants in their learning. As participants move through the developmental stages of understanding self, reflecting on their most effective self, to then understanding others and finally exploring how they can present their most effective self to others, participants advance through the curriculum and ultimately leave our classes, programs, and boot camps with new and improved, 21st century soft skills needed in college and professional environments.

While we feel excited about the prospect of building upon and eventually disseminating our established pedagogy for teaching soft skills, we are also considering strategies for evaluating our teaching practices to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the diverse groups our Center supports through the ACT-IT, soft skills development process. To embark on this future work, we are considering applying the Kirkpatrick Model (2016) to evaluate the Center for Third Space Thinking's educational programming. The Kirkpatrick Model includes four levels of evaluation that instructors can use to determine student learning and teaching effectiveness throughout an experience. These four levels include (1) reaction, (2) learning, (3) behavior, and (4) result. Future work will require our team to consider how we can establish both formal and informal structures throughout our various programs that assess the quality, rigor, and effectiveness of our teaching practices.

Assessing Soft Skills

In an effort to maintain alignment with our ambition to put hard edges on soft skills, we brought that same approach to assessing soft skills as we did to defining and teaching them. The constituent elements of soft skills are complex, interactive, and subtle, and our measurements of those elements should be similarly nuanced. This requires a variety of assessment approaches, some that are qualitative and quantitative. Observations, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and self-reports are some examples of potential data collection strategies for assessing our programming and participant learning.

One component of our current assessment is an online self-report questionnaire. We hired a leading evaluation company, PDRI, to develop a customized assessment tool to measure the performance of our learners on each of the five soft skills ACE-IT attributes. In our assessments, we rely on a battery of more than 20 separate activities to judge our students' performance. These include reading and evaluating their written journals, face-to-face one-on-one interactions with other students such as the silent interview and empathetic interview, and their effectiveness in group activities like the marshmallow challenge and the chair exercise. Each activity and related assessment contributes to enhancing participants' intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, and together they enhance overall competencies. We sequence the performance of the activities and our evaluations of them to lead learners from building up their intra-personal competencies to be able to strengthen interpersonal competencies.

The Challenges and Successes of Assessing Soft Skills

When we started the Third Space Thinking work, we did not have a formal assessment. Feedback from our collaborators and advisors encouraged us to address this gap. As we began thinking about how we might assess soft skill development using the ACE-IT attributes internally, we quickly realized that we did not have the capacity nor the expertise necessary from the organizational psychology and assessment fields. This mismatch between what we had and what we discovered we needed led us to partner with PDRI to create version 1.0 of our assessment tool which allowed us to begin the process of placing hard edges on soft skills. Directed towards our executive clients, the first iteration provided a solid foundation for establishing a benchmarking and measurement tool. Now, participants had a way of assessing their skills and determining potential areas for improvement in their soft skill abilities. Furthermore, the assessment provided some common language for participants to discuss successes and areas for improvement. Yet, as we learned along the way and expanded our work to consider earlier stages in the life cycle of leadership, we needed an improved assessment. Critiques of the first version were that it was "gameable." Our participants knew the areas we wanted to emphasize in their learning processes, like exhibiting empathy, and they could respond in alignment with our desired outcomes. Version 2.0, which we are currently releasing, has been created to meet the needs of our newest group of participants - high school youth. This youth assessment is specifically created for individuals between the ages of 14 and 24. As we look ahead to future assessments, we are excited about a version 3.0 that will build upon these prior iterations by building in more rigor through a forced-choice assessment approach that is less gameable with more questions to probe at individual intent and personality.

Future Work for Assessing Soft Skills

As a result of both the challenges and successes we experienced with the assessment tool, the TST Assessment Tool 2.0 which will be more rigorous, allowing the tool to capture greater

nuance. Since the initial assessment was targeted to our professional executive groups, the next iteration will be responsive to our wider spectrum of participants including high school youth and undergraduate college students, as detailed in the following section. The updated assessment will use the forced choice format to mitigate response biases by presenting multiple behavioral statements simultaneously and asking participants to endorse which statement is true. This new tool will contribute to both streamlining and systematizing the evaluation of soft skills.

As useful as these kinds of standardized assessments can be, we are acutely aware that one tool cannot fully capture every dimension of peoples' soft skill attributes. As is the case with educational assessments and pedagogical best practices, multiple and varied types of assessments are needed at different points in time to capture how individuals learn and develop skills. Our aspirational target is to formalize the evaluation techniques to judge as consistently as possible the 14 intrapersonal and the 20 interpersonal activities.

Applying Soft Skills

The ultimate goal of our work is that individuals who participate in our programs, whether they be high school youth, college students, or professionals in their respective fields, will develop the skillsets needed by using the tools we have provided. As a result, they will build and strengthen their ACE-IT attributes in support of the advancement of their soft skills, which can be applied to their personal and professional contexts. Though soft skills have been critiqued by those who question its application to real-world settings, we assert that soft skills are extremely applicable to everyday scenarios as we have seen them function in our personal lives as well as in the lives of our participants. The Center's founding director, Dr. Ernest Wilson, shares the following reflection in regard to applying soft skills in his own life:

“Over the past several years, I have used ACE-IT in my professional life – as dean of a large communication and journalism school, I have had to apply these attributes literally every day in my leadership capacity. I have also applied soft skills as an advisor to governments, companies, and non-profits through collaborations with organizations such as the Department of State, World Bank, and earlier in Poland and Nigeria. I have also led teams that have applied soft skills consistently in the practical world including.”

As Dr. Ernest Wilson shares, the application of soft skills is varied and expansive in terms of its influence on a multitude of aspects of our everyday experiences inclusive of classrooms and offices, as well as beyond.

Leadership Across the Life Cycle

We have three main groups that we have focused on for providing soft skills training more broadly, and opportunities to develop ACE-IT attributes in particular, over the years. These

groups span the pipeline to include professional executives, undergraduate students, and most recently- high school youth.

Professional Executives

For the professionals that we have worked with, both domestically and abroad, we offer support by focusing on mission-driven processes and strategies that allow them to align their individual responsibilities with larger organizational goals. In considering how they can better match their performance with the work of the company, soft skills development is key to how professionals communicate within and beyond their given role. Common intra-organizational challenges such as working across silos, hiring needed talent, and strengthening departmental cultures, can be advanced through individuals with strong intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities.

Undergraduate Students

As a part of the University of Southern California's community within the Annenberg School of Communication, we have also had the privilege of working with current college students through formal classroom settings. In these educational environments, students have been open to exploring intrapersonal challenges related to topics such as resiliency, anxiety, and their effect on their classroom performance and college experiences. Based on the scholarly literature, and our observations of reflective journaling assignments, today's college students are concerned about topics related to emotional intelligence and fragility. Students have largely found the class exercises, and the courses overall, to be valuable.

High School Youth

In our most recent exploratory work with high school youth, we have both learned a lot about and from these young scholars through our institute programming. While traditional reading assignments have been less impactful, they have responded well to culturally relevant approaches that facilitate soft skills training in ways that recognize the abilities they carry as individuals, from their families, and through their communities. Through the process that allows them to recognize the relevance of ACE-IT attributes to their lives and their future educational opportunities, their excitement, as well as that of their families, fuel the need for more of these programs geared towards the particular skillsets that college and career readiness requires.

Learners in each cluster are different and require their particular needs to be met given the context of our soft skills efforts. Shaped by unique cultures, opportunity structures, and life experiences, tailored pedagogical approaches are pivotal to ensuring that participants can ultimately apply their skills to diverse environments. To meet this goal, we pay close attention to the scope, content, and sequencing of our delivery models while maintaining a commitment to the five ACE-IT attributes that are core to advancing soft skills in alignment with the Third Space model.

The Center team has taught learners in multiple settings around the world as well as up and down the educational ladder. We have taught across levels- including high schools, universities, and workplaces; across sectors- including public, private, and NGOs; across industries- ranging from communications and media to retail, banking, and healthcare; across sizes and scales- from large Fortune 50 companies and billion-dollar philanthropies to medium-sized organizations and start-ups; and finally across regions- including groups from Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Collectively, we believe that our past experiences, and the great promise we have for future work, exemplify the application of soft skills into everyday life experiences spanning the educational and professional pathways.

Conclusion

Moving forward in this work, we have a few immediate next steps as well as longer-term priorities for helping our constituent groups and a broader audience to develop their soft skills using the Third Space Thinking approach. Our immediate next steps include formalizing and improving upon the curriculum for our newest constituency group- high school youth. Through our early work with these young people and their families, we have learned about the importance of integrating the foundations of social and emotional learning (SEL) to our current approaches. Also, as mentioned, we are working on the next version of our assessment tool so that it can be updated and responsive to a more expansive clientele given the growing need for soft skills across sectors. As we continue our programming, we hope to not only better assess learning and leadership abilities but to also test the relationships between intrapersonal and interpersonal development as it relates to soft skills abilities. Longer-term goals include diversifying the platforms through which we teach, measure, and apply soft skills. Currently, we have been improving upon classroom, workshop, and institute learning environments. Moving forward, we want to consider how we can broaden our impact by using online and mobile platforms to share our programming experiences more widely while maintaining our commitment to a high level of quality and rigor.

In just a few short years, the Center for Third Space Thinking has built upon prior efforts and research to define, teach, measure, and apply soft skills to hundreds of individuals, despite the critiques from the field that it could not be done. While we have areas for growth and development, we are even more excited and motivated to continue to strengthen our efforts given the importance of soft skills in educational and professional environments in the 21st century.

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