Transform the learning journey in behavioral competency development programs to attain sustainable personal change

Laura Cortellazzo, Sara Bonesso, Fabrizio Gerli

Department of Management, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy.

Abstract

Behavioral competencies have become the most in-demand skills in the job market, due to their influence on efficacy and personal and organizational performance. Previous studies highlighted the need not only to involve students in programs that focus on the acquisition and improvement of their behavioral repertoire, but also to provide students with techniques to pursue continuous learning during their life span. The paper illustrates the case of an educational project implemented by an Italian University aiming to deliver innovative learning approaches for the development of behavioural competencies. The project encompasses different educational formats (courses, laboratories, seminars) based on interconnected theoretical frameworks, namely the whole person learning pedagogy, experiential learning theory, and the intentional change theory. The methodologies implemented and the outcomes attained in terms of participation, satisfaction, learning and employability of participants are discussed. Implications for instructors and future advancements are discussed.

Keywords: behavioral competency development; emotional and social intelligence competencies; experiential learning theory; intentional change theory

1. Introduction

This study illustrates the design and the implementation of an education project that aims to deliver innovative educational approaches for the development of behavioural competencies, which have become the most in-demand skills in the job market, due to their influence on individual and team superior performance across industries and jobs (Boyatzis, 2006; O'Boyle Jr. et al., 2011; Sala, Druskat, & Mount, 2005). A behavioral competence (also defined "emotional and social intelligence competencies", or "soft skills / life skills") is the set of underlying characteristics of a person that refers to the ability to recognize, understand and manage one's own emotions, and others' emotions, as well as analyze information and situations. These encompass self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship management and cognitive competencies (Boyatzis & Sala, 2004; Goleman, 1998). Not only these competencies demonstrate to be relevant antecedents for work-related outcomes, but they are also crucial for graduates' employability, as confirmed by recent international employers' surveys (e.g. LinkedIn, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020). These skills are expected to increase in relevance in the future, especially in the face of automation and artificial intelligence, which are progressively replacing routine tasks and jobs. However, despite the recognized relevance of behavioural competencies in the organizational context, both the literature and the labour market have frequently emphasized the existence of a skills gap (Jackson, 2009; QS Intelligence Unit, 2019).

Considering that behavioral competencies are becoming crucial for the future of work (McKinsey&Company, 2021), we address the following research question: How can higher education institutions integrate in their curricula the development of students' behavioral competencies? Even though, during the last decades, European higher education institutions have promoted initiatives in this field, they seem to have some limitations. First, they aim to develop only one or a limited number of competencies, such as teamwork or leadership, instead of providing students with a methodology for becoming aware of their overall portfolio of competencies and promote its development coherently with their future career objectives. Second, they effectively engage students during the classroom activity, but rarely pursue a long-lasting change in their behaviour. Lastly, these courses are often provided only in management curricula. However, research has shown that behavioural competencies are crucial skills in every job and every sector, thus their development does not pertain only to specific disciplinary areas.

Against this backdrop, an Italian Academic Research Centre of a Public University, established in 2012, implemented a project which has addressed the need to involve students belonging to different educational fields in a programme that focuses on the improvement of their behavioural repertoire. This is achieved by providing them with the methodology and the related pedagogical techniques needed to pursue a long-lasting and continuous learning. The next sections will describe in detail the theoretical framework on which the educational

project is built and the structure of the project. Then, we present the method adopted to analyze the impact of the project, and we provide a discussion of the outcomes attained.

2. Theoretical background

The educational project was designed relying on interconnected theoretical frameworks, namely the whole person learning pedagogy (Rogers, 1980), experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), and the intentional change theory (ICT) (Boyatzis, 2006). The engagement of the whole person in education has been described as the essence of experiential learning in developing behavioural skills (Hoover, 2010). Similarly, experiential learning theory claims that learning is a holistic process in which the person adapts to the world through the integrated functioning of the person's thinking, feeling, perceiving, behaving, and interacting with the environment (Kolb, 1984). Bridging the two aforementioned pedagogical approaches, the ICT (Boyatzis 2006) has proposed a learning process which consists of five phases that help the individual acquire awareness of the need to change and improve his behavioural repertoire. The first phase concerns a reflection on one's ideal self, which is one's desired future and leads to the development of a personal vision. The second step refers to the identification of the individual's current behaviours and abilities (real self). Participants carry out a 360-degree assessment of their competencies, which fosters the awareness of their current competency portfolio and enables the comparison between their ideal and real self. In the third phase people are encouraged to draft their personal learning plan, choosing behavioural competencies as learning goals and identifying concrete actions to practice. The fourth stage involves individuals in the experimentation of the concrete actions in real-life contexts. The last phase is focused on identifying and building trusted relationships that support and encourage each step in the change process.

In addition, the project relies on reflective learning, which facilitates the process of analysing the experience and converting it into learning, through the construction of meaning (Boud et al., 1985). This is promoted through self-reflection activities like journaling and peer coaching. Journaling consists of a retrospective narrative of experiences from which thoughts, feelings, actions and outcomes arise (Jefferson et al., 2014). Journaling facilitates the individuals in giving a structure to their experience in practicing new behaviors, searching for the deeper meanings of the events. It also provides a safe environment for examining the situations from multiple perspectives, become aware of the mistakes, understand if and how the behaviors manifested require to be changed in the future and progressively gauge the progress they are making coherently with their learning plan. Peer coaching is a confidential process by which two peers work together to reflect on current practices, expand, refine and build new skills, share ideas, and teach each other (Robbins, 1991). Coaching is intrinsically a reflection effort, as coaches can ask questions that spur the peer's critical reflection (Robertson, 2005).

3. Educational program

This project encompasses different educational formats (courses, laboratories and seminars) that allow students to tailor their training experience coherently with their learning objectives. As personal motivation represents a prerequisite for attaining effective learning outcomes, all the proposed activities are elective. Students can include the activities in their study plan and earn extra university credits (except for the seminars). All activities provide Open Badges that certify the competencies learned by students.

3.1. Courses

Emotional Competencies and Individual Development. It is a course (30 hours plus assignments; 6 university credits) that leads the participants to acquire a methodology to develop behavioural competencies in accordance with their career goals.

Leadership. Through this course (30 hours plus assignments; 6 university credits) students become aware of the different leadership styles that can be adopted to build a resonant relationship with the followers. They also have the opportunity to assess their personal leadership styles, craft an individual leadership development plan and apply in real-life contexts the learned techniques to improve their behaviours.

3.2. Laboratories

Competency Lab. It is a cycle of four interactive lectures (15 hours plus assignments; 3 university credits), whose aim is to increase participants' awareness of the behavioural competencies needed to achieve their professional goals and improve their competitiveness on the labour market, also through conversations with labour market operators. During each academic year, four identical editions of the Lab are offered to students.

3.3. Seminars

Pills of Competencies. The students who attend the "Competency Lab" or the course "Emotional Competencies and Individual Development", are allowed to attend some interactive seminars aimed at nurturing specific competencies. During the year, the following pills are delivered: empathy, adaptability, persuasion, stress management and self-control, achievement orientation, team working, communication, and negotiation. Each pill is delivered in two seminars each lasting 3,5 hours plus assignments.

An *ad hoc* online platform has been developed to accompany students along the training activities, making available a set of tools (questionnaires, personal reflection exercises, 360-degree evaluations). It offers a plethora of exercises and supporting materials that can be accessed during the didactic activities and from which students can monitor their own advancement. The exercises proposed in the platform have been personalized for the specific

target starting from the work of Goleman et al. (2002), and follow the aforementioned steps of the ICT.

Reflection activities are also proposed and scheduled. As for journaling, the instructors deliver a template for the journal in which students are asked to describe in detail their practice of new behaviours, their successes and difficulties. As for peer coaching, the instructors train the students illustrating the role of the coach and of the coachee, and offer some examples of reflective questions to use during the session. After the session students are asked to fill in a form in which they report the benefits attained from the peer coaching session and the difficulties they faced.

Students are stimulated, after the in-class activities, to continue to practice the new behaviours in different contexts, to write their journal and to carry out peer-coaching sessions. From 3 to 6 months after the in-class activities a follow-up session is organized, with the aim to make the students share their experience of practicing and experimenting the learning of behavioural competencies according to a cross-fertilization approach, and to discuss the successes they experienced and how they faced possible difficulties. Table 1 illustrates for each educational format implemented in the project the learning techniques adopted.

Table 1. Learning techniques of the project's offerings

	Ideal Self	Real Self	Plan	Experimentation	Trust relationships	Journaling	Peer coaching
Emotional Competencies and Individual Developm.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Leadership		x	x	x	x	x	x
Competency lab	x	x			x		
Pills of competencies				x		x	x

4. Method and results

The impact of the project has been measured considering: i) the level of participation; ii) the level of satisfaction of the participants, iii) their perception on the learning outcomes attained iv) the impact of the project on students' employability.

Since the starting of the educational project in 2013, the number of applications have steadily increased. In June 2021 the project reached a total of 2,908 participants, enrolled in master's degree courses of the University.

At the end of the activities, students are asked to express their level of satisfaction and their perception on the level of learning outcomes on a scale 1-7. Data show that 82.35% of students, involved from 2013 and 2021, indicated that the learning program satisfied their expectations completely or at high level (equal or higher than 6). Concerning the ideal self, 88.79% of the graduates found the self-reflection exercises useful for pondering their desired future. The findings also highlight the effectiveness of the personal vision in supporting students. The activities related to the real self allowed students to understand their level of manifestation of behavioural competencies (87.32% students selected the 6 and 7 response) and to identify those competencies they needed to develop. Not significant difference emerged among different cohorts and students in disciplinary areas. Periodically a survey is sent to gather information on students' capacity to successfully enter the labour market considering both their subjective and objective employability. Subjective employability (SE) is assessed through four items adapted from De Cuyper et al. (2014) on a 1-5 scale. Objective employability (OE) is assessed through the number of job offers received after the end of the educational programs that are coherent with their idea of future career. The results, summarized in Table 2, underlined that who benefited most from writing their personal vision were those that showed a higher perceived employability. Both subjective and objective employability were positively correlated with the ability of the students to identify in their learning plan the set of competencies to be developed.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

	Mean	SD	Ideal self	Personal vision	Real self	Learning plan	SE
Ideal Self	6.38	0.75					
Personal vision	6.20	0.95	0.73**				
Real self	6.37	0.78	0.44**	0.50**			
Learning plan	6.19	0.98	0.46**	0.55**	0.68**		
SE	4.64	1.48	0.09	0.17*	0.12	0.18*	
OE	2.35	2.71	-0.06	0.11	0.04	0.20*	0.37**

***p-value < 0.001, **p-value < 0.01, **p-value < 0.05

5. Implications

The project has refined the methodological approach of Intentional Change Theory (ICT) and Experiential Learning Theory (Boyatzis, 2006; Kolb, 1984) and the studies on the behavioural approach of emotional intelligence (Goleman et al., 2002) in different ways. First, the project has advanced the aforementioned frameworks from a pedagogical point of

view, designing educational programs for students attending courses in different disciplinary areas. Second, the project has provided evidence on how behavioural competency development can be introduced in the academic curricula by means of various educational formats (courses, seminars and laboratories). Extant management educational literature has mainly proposed the implementation of courses, neglecting the opportunity to rely on alternative didactic activities that can be delivered several times during an academic year attracting more participants than traditional courses. Moreover, it has demonstrated how in-class lectures and experiential approaches complement each other in favouring self-reflection and action learning. Finally, the project also shows that individual and social experiential approaches like self-reflection, peer coaching, journaling, actual experimentation, and group conversations, can be effectively proposed not only for practicing specific competencies but also to direct the personal learning process toward the definition of the competencies an individual wishes to learn.

Limitations of the current design of the program offer directions for advancing the project. First, the study does not evaluate the effectiveness of the project in terms of change in the level of possession of students' competencies. Future research should address this issue implementing a quasi experimental design aiming to compare course and control group students through a pre- and post competency assessment. Second, the program currently targets Master's degree students, but instructors can evaluate the opportunity to tailor the didactic offerings to bachelor students' training needs. Furthermore, the impact of the specific techniques (peer coaching, journaling etc.) on the learning outcomes could be further explored. Finally, from the methodological point of view, the integration of digital learning technologies can represent an opportunity for increasing learner's engagement and motivation over time. For instance, the translation of the methods and techniques adopted in the program into a digital app could provide a learning experience based on gamification, guiding the individuals in their competency development in the long-term, overcoming the honeymoon effect that compromises the individual continuous improvement once the training activity is over.

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