

Nurturing students' awareness of their behavioral competencies: The Competency Lab experience

Fabrizio Gerli, Sara Bonesso, Laura Cortellazzo

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

Abstract

Behavioral competencies, also defined emotional and social competencies (ESCs), are considered to be increasingly important for graduates' workplace readiness. Drawing on studies that adopt the "whole person" learning approach and the Intentional Change Theory (ICT), this paper illustrates a teaching approach that higher educational institutions should implement, across different curricula and disciplinary fields, in order to improve students' awareness of their behavioral competencies and to direct their development coherently with the future professional and personal objectives. In doing this, we give an illustration of the lessons learned from an educational initiative, Competency Lab, designed by a research center of a public university in Italy, that was devoted to master's students. From the analysis of the students' learning outcomes, the paper shows the positive impact of: i) proposing the ICT approach, through which students assume personal responsibility for the development of ESCs; ii) integrating multiple learning methods and tools with a specific application of experiential methods to stimulate self-reflection and active experimentation; and iii) encouraging students' engagement through web-based technologies. We provide implications for educators illustrating how students can self-define the ESCs to develop, following a rigorous method that is tailored to their specific level of maturity and personal motivation.

Keywords: *Behavioral competencies; emotional and social competencies; higher education; intentional change theory; experiential learning; whole person learning.*

1. Introduction

The positive effect of behavioral skills or emotional and social competencies (ESCs) on successful individual performance across sectors and jobs has been widely acknowledged in the literature (Boyatzis 1982; Hopkins and Bilimoria 2008; Spencer and Spencer 1993). These competencies have not only been demonstrated to be relevant antecedents for work-related outcomes, but are also considered crucial for graduates' labor market entry (Hoover et al. 2010). Some cases in which behavioral competencies have been introduced in the academic setting have been illustrated in prior studies (e.g. Chen et al. 2004; Sheehan et al. 2009; Waddock and Lozano 2013). Despite the new insights provided by these educational experiences, they show some limitations. First, they aim to develop only one or a limited number of competencies, especially social ones like 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 may engage students with experiential techniques for promoting self-reflection and active learning, but it does not provide the participants with a structured plan in order to practice competencies after the classroom activity and pursue a long-lasting change in their behavior. Lastly, these courses can often be attended only by students enrolled in management curricula. Research has shown that behavioral competencies are crucial skills in every job and every sector, and therefore their development does not pertain only to specific disciplinary areas.

A different methodological approach to competency development has been proposed by those educational programs that have implemented the "whole person" learning approach and Intentional Change Theory (ICT) to skills development (Barbera et al. 2015; Boyatzis and Saatcioglu 2008; Hoover et al. 2010). These studies show that the development of behavioral competencies requires students' engagement in the intentional change process (Boyatzis 2006). Indeed, "learning does not occur until the learner makes it happen" (Hoover et al. 2010: 194). The effectiveness of the "whole person" approach has been demonstrated in longitudinal studies that assess the learning outcomes, in terms of variation in competencies, in full-time MBA programs (Boyatzis and Saatcioglu 2008). However, these experiences have introduced the development of ESCs as a single module/course within a business master's program or executive program, without a systematic approach to the development of graduates' competency at the university level.

Considering the aforementioned limits in the extant academic courses, the main purpose of this paper is to present a didactic approach that HEIs should consider in order to improve students' awareness of behavioral competencies and to direct their development throughout their career path coherently with the students' future professional and personal objectives.

2. Behavioral competencies awareness: The Competency Lab experience

Since the need for the development of students' soft skills has become more pressing, as a result of growing demand from the labor market, an Italian public university decided in 2012 to establish a center (the "Competency Centre"). This was the first academic center in Italy to concentrate on conducting research, training and consultancy activities in the development and assessment of soft skills. The mission of the Center was, from the beginning, to improve people's performance and employability through the development of their emotional and social competency portfolios. With specific regard to students, among its educational initiatives, the Competency Centre designed the "Competency Lab," a cycle of four interactive seminars (for a total of 15 academic hours and three academic credits) that aim to guide the participants through a process of becoming aware of their behavioral competencies. During each academic year, the Centre organizes four identical editions of the Lab. For each edition, a maximum of 40 students are admitted through an online enrollment system. Students from all the different disciplinary areas taught at this university (economics, management, humanities, languages and science) can apply to the Lab on a voluntary basis. The personal motivation represents a prerequisite for attaining effective learning outcomes. For this reason these didactic activities are not mandatory in the academic curricula.

2.1. Structure of the Competency Lab

The Competency Lab requires students to attend four classroom seminars and to carry out some assignments on a digital platform developed by the Center to support participants with the ICT discoveries or discontinuities (Boyatzis, 2006). These discoveries can be associated with "wake-up calls" or moments that awaken the person to the need to consider a change and that lead to successive improvements in behavior and subsequent competency development (Kolb and Boyatzis 1970; Boyatzis 2006; Leonard 2008).

In the first seminar, students are introduced to the ESCs, their impact on performance, and their relevance for employability. The ICT process is then illustrated and the first discovery (ideal self) is explained, which will lead students toward a mindful reflection on what matters most to them and on who they want to be. At the end of the first seminar, students are asked to do some assignments on their dreams, passions, and inner values by accessing the digital platform, and they complete these assignments before the second seminar. The assignments given are based on the work of McKee et al. (2008).

In the second seminar, drawing on their preliminary reflections on their ideal self, students are trained to conduct a peer coaching session and then take part in such a session. The starting point of the peer coaching proposed during the Competency Lab is helping the peer to achieve a deeper level of analysis and reflection on his/her own values, passions, and future dreams, to make hidden assumptions explicit. After the peer coaching session, students are asked – as an assignment that is due before the next seminar – to draft their "personal vision

statement,” which should be at least 1,000 words long, and in which they should describe in detail their desired life between seven and ten years into the future. The instructor provides guidelines for developing a compelling personal vision and associating it with those ESCs that are needed to attain the students' desired future. Indeed, in order to allow students to use the personal vision as the driver of change and as a tool to direct their efforts, the students have to identify, explain, and rank the emotional and social competencies needed to attain their personal vision. In so doing, and helped by the instructor who gives them feedback, they are spurred to make explicit their assumptions about the relationships between their future goals and the behavioral competencies required to obtain them, independently from how often those competencies are actually manifested. After this, the second discovery (real self) is introduced, and students are involved in both a self-assessment and a multisource assessment of their ESCs through external raters who are invited to the digital platform by the students. These external raters, chosen from among the student's personal and/or professional contacts, have to know the student well and to have observed him/her in action, and they are asked to provide an open, honest, and anonymous judgment to help the student identify the competencies that he/she demonstrates most and those that he/she demonstrates least. The ESCs framework adopted in this step is the Emotional and Social Competency Inventory – University Version (ESCI-U), which has been widely adopted in academic and organizational settings (Boyatzis and Goleman 2007; Boyatzis and Sala 2004), integrated with three additional competencies. The questionnaire encompasses 79 items to evaluate 17 competencies: six emotional competencies (emotional self-awareness, achievement orientation, adaptability, emotional self-control, positive outlook, and conscientiousness), nine social competencies (empathy, organizational awareness, service orientation, conflict management, coach and mentor, influence, inspirational leadership, teamwork, and change catalyst) and two cognitive competencies (systems thinking and pattern recognition).

The third seminar allows students to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and helps them to understand which competencies they need to develop in order to achieve their ideal self. Specifically, during the class meeting, students receive a personal report on their ESCs profile collected through the self-assessment and the 360-degree assessment. The multisource feedback enables students to reflect on their strengths (competencies that are both indicated as necessary if they are to obtain their personal vision and that they demonstrate most) and weaknesses (competencies that are indicated as necessary for their personal vision but that they demonstrate less). Afterwards, they are involved in a second peer coaching session, where they are asked to support each other in reflecting, through the narration of critical events, on how the competencies that have emerged as their strengths and weaknesses grew out of their past, and on how these competencies can help them to pursue their desired future.

In the fourth and last seminar, the labor market expectations – in terms of graduate competency profiles – are discussed through the experience of companies specializing in recruitment and selection. Simulated job interviews that aim to evaluate ESCs, as well as suggestions on how to emphasize soft skills in the recruiting process, are provided.

2.2. Learning outcomes of Competency Lab

From its launch in 2013 until November 2018, the Competency Lab has involved 556 graduates. Approximately 63 percent of the students came from the Economic/Scientific disciplinary fields and approximately 37 percent from the Humanistic/Linguistic disciplinary fields. Data on learning outcomes are collected online approximately two weeks after the end of the didactic activity.

Concerning the discovery of the ideal self, 88.79% of the graduates (students who selected the “6-agree” and “7-completely agree” response options on the seven-point scale) found the self-reflection exercises useful for pondering the person they wanted to be and their desired future. The findings also highlight the effectiveness of the personal vision in supporting students as they set their objectives for the future (81.80%). Some comments provided by the students on the first ICT discovery are the following: *“The introspective analysis that I carried out on myself further opened my eyes to new possibilities, helped to rediscover my old passions, understand my priorities and how I can achieve my future”*; *“I felt stimulated and motivated to project myself in the future. Before attending this laboratory I had no idea of what I would do after graduation”*.

The discovery of the real self allowed students to understand their level of use of ESCs better (87.32%). In some cases, the participants felt surprised by the external raters’ comments on their strengths and weaknesses. The mismatch between the personal and others’ perspectives triggered the students to reflect further on their behaviors, increasing their self-awareness. Almost 85% of the participants agreed that this discovery helped them to identify those ESCs that they needed to develop. Some comments provided by students are the following: *“I expected the strengths that the external evaluators emphasized. Initially, after the first reading of the real self feedback I was surprised about the weaknesses they indicated, but reflecting on them after the meeting I understood that they are not so wrong as I initially thought”*; *“The feedback I received enabled me to be more aware of how others see and perceive me, to understand my potentialities and limits and to become more confident that I can improve them”*.

Concerning the classroom lectures, the students appreciated the use of videos and movie clips as an effective method to identify in practice the behaviors related to the emotional and social competencies (93.25%). One comment was: *“I found some videos watched during the class very useful and the exercise to identify the competencies manifested by the characters through the observation of their behaviors. Videos helped me to better understand the*

meaning of the different competencies and how they can be manifested in concrete situations.”

The participants regarded the peer coaching activity as stimulating but at the same time challenging, and this is confirmed by the lower percentage of satisfaction for this in comparison to the other learning methods (66.23%). Specifically, the participants required more time to become familiar with the technique (the coaching session usually lasts 30 minutes), and they found some difficulties in playing an active and supportive role as a coach for their classmates, while asking provocative and difficult questions to help their peers to advance in their learning paths. However, this technique was positively evaluated by the students when they were being coached, as they saw it as a means to clarify their goals and to stimulate self-enquiry. Some comments follow: *“Peer coaching activity was really useful. Speaking with people that I did not know helps a lot to lay myself bare”*; *“Peer coaching was undoubtedly useful especially because you have to speak with people who you do not know. This forced me to be as clear as possible about my objectives and my personal characteristics. Peer coaching spurred me to avoid speaking in vague terms and to be more precise.”*

The meetings with representatives of the labor market were evaluated as useful at the highest level by 78.79% of the students. They specifically mentioned the possibility of gaining a better understanding of firms' expectations, and receiving valuable insights and suggestions about how to highlight ESCs during job searches.

3. Discussion

From the methodological point of view, the case analysis advances the understanding of how the “whole person” learning approach and the ICT can be effectively tailored to the needs of graduates from different disciplines. In contrast to previous academic experiences that focus on the development of specific competencies defined at the institutional level or by instructors, the paper shows how learning goals, in terms of ESCs, can be defined by students in a way that matches their professional and personal future vision and that follows a rigorous method. For this reasons, the students feel more motivated and engaged in the process of intentional change, maintaining a high level of commitment to their objectives.

Moreover, the findings outline how classroom lectures and experiential approaches complement each other in encouraging self-reflection and active learning. The empirical evidence showed that students need to understand the meaning of ESCs and to observe how they can be manifested in practice, confirming the important role of vicarious learning methods. Furthermore, lectures provide students with guidelines for performing the assignments related to each ICT discovery effectively and acquiring the declarative knowledge necessary for engaging in experiential learning activities. Our research shows that

individual and social experiential approaches like self-reflection, peer coaching, 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 that an individual wishes to learn.

The case provides also evidence of the effective integration between classroom activities and online learning. The Centre has implemented a web-based platform through which students can access assignments and materials at the different stages of the learning process. First, the platform plays an important role in the coordination of the activities between students and instructors. Indeed, the instructor assigns a deadline for each assignment that relates to the material that will be discussed in the upcoming classroom session. Moreover, the instructors can add comments to the assignments, like the vision statement, that are crucial for directing the learning process. The instructors may also decide to give the students access to feedback before or after the class for pedagogical reasons. Second, since the proposed activities require deep reflection that can take place over a week or two, the digital platform provides flexibility that allows the assignments to be carried out anytime and anywhere depending on the individuals' availability. Finally, the platform generates outputs that can be used by the students to increase their self-awareness further.

4. Conclusion

Our research suggests important implications for the development of ESCs in university settings, as well as promising avenues for future research. First, universities should formally recognize the development of ESCs along with the delivery of professional/technical skills in their educational mission. For this reason ESCs should be taught autonomously from courses in specific disciplines, in order to guarantee effective learning outcomes. This requires the recognition of the strategic relevance of soft skills, and commitment at the institutional level, so that all faculty members are engaged in the design of dedicated programs on ESCs across different master's degrees. The case illustrated has offered new methodological insights for HEIs, and it can be replicated in other higher education settings. Second, to pursue the effective development of ESCs, students need to be supported in setting their own learning goals. Instructors may assume the role of learning facilitators rather than of transmitters of knowledge, giving more space for participants' reflections and interaction, and providing personal feedback to direct their change.

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