Soft Skills On-Line Development in Times of Crisis

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Abstract: While the 21st century is typified with constant change, over the past few months, with the break of the COVID-19, the world is undergoing tremendous changes at a pace and magnitude that have not been seen before. It has been argued that coping and succeeding in the changing reality of the 21st century globally requires a wider set of skills than before, many of which are soft, social-emotional skills. This is particularly true in the uncertainty of the current times worldwide. Incorporating the development of soft skills in the current academic systems, which still hold a mainly cognitive focus has been found challenging and efforts are relatively scarce and isolated. This is becoming even more challenging as the current situation has forced the academy to adapt quickly to digital teaching methods and the use of various platforms for E learning. Aim: to presents a unique method and tool for cultivating soft skills in students, which can be integrated in the general curriculum through digital and E learning. Method: presenting the theoretical basis of the model and exemplifying the ways it can be used in different subjects and as part of higher education institutions (HEI) strategy. Result: although pilot studies are still undergoing, it is believed that integrating soft skills development using online learning and linking them to course subjects will help HEI to stay relevant in a changing world and fulfil their role in preparing students to the 21st century reality, in the times of the recent health crisis COVID-19 and beyond.

Keywords: *21st century skills; emotional-social intelligence; higher education; online teaching; COVID-19.*

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1. Background

1.1. Global crisis as an opportunity for leveraging

In the last few decades, there has been an increased realization that the 21st century is characterized by constant, frequent, rapid and profound changes, which entails different demands and expectations and requires a wider scope of capabilities than ever before in adapting to the changing world. At this specific point in time of the COVID-19 global crisis, the professional and academic worlds these changes are presented with new and unfamiliar challenges to on macro and micro levels which require adapting to a new and dynamic reality.

In recent decades, it has been recognized that soft skills (Deming, 2017), and especially emotional and social skills (Bar-On, 2006), play an important role in many fields and disciplines, and should be cultivated through education (Warin, 2017). Yet, its assimilation into academic curricula has been relatively limited, isolated and inadequate (Heckman & Kautz, 2012).

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning, this problem seems to be exacerbated. It is precisely at this stage of quarantine and social isolation, worries and anxieties, economic and professional uncertainty, that soft skills are particularly important. In particular, the issue of distance learning poses challenges for lecturers and students alike, as they must cope not only with technological barriers and obstacles, but also emotional and social challenges. However, although crucial to coping, distance learning is typically perceived as a challenging platform for soft skills development. This article presents a method and tool to develop students' soft skills through distance learning. While especially suited to the current COVID-19 crisis, it can later serve as a milestone in preparing learners to the needs of the 21st century, without any major change to the academic curriculum.

1.2. Emotional-social intelligence

The term 'soft skills' describes a set of skills which are not purely cognitive or technical (Hurrell, 2016). It entails intra-personal and interpersonal skills that are important for optimal functioning in general (Heckman & Kautz, 2012) and effective coping with the challenges of a changing world in particular (Deming, 2017). Many of these skills are included in the concept of emotional intelligence (Friedman, 2007; Massimiliano, 2004).

In its essence, emotional intelligence deals with the optimal combination of emotion and thinking (Mayer & Salovey 1997). According to Mayer and Salovey (1997), emotional intelligence consists of a person's ability to recognize, use, understand and manage emotions in himself and in others. Later models have suggested a set of emotional and social skills and competencies that rely on emotional intelligence, which are associated with success in various areas that can be developed (Bar-On, 2006; Goleman, 1998).

In recent years there has been broad scientific agreement on the contribution of emotional intelligence and emotional-social skills to physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships, in academic achievements, and in work outcomes in various organizations and professions around the world (Bar-On, 2006; Borges, Kirkham, Deardorff & Moore, 2012; Carmeli, 2003; Lennick, 2007; Levitats & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017; Mikolajczak, Menil & Luminet, 2007; Naseem, 2017; Rode, Arthaud-Day, Ramaswami & Howes, 2017). In particular, their importance to coping with the challenges of the 21st century and contributing to success in a changing world were emphasized (Leberecht, 2018). Those include coping with increased stress and demonstrating flexibility and resilience (Which are important in dealing with the current covid-19 crisis for example). However, development of soft skills, and especially emotional-social skills is deficient in academia, and if they are included in the curriculum, they usually appear as an isolated course.

1.3. Emotional-social education

Given the importance of social-emotional skills in the present age on the one hand, and their limited place in the curriculum today, on the other hand, it seems necessary to initiate a deliberate change in the academic world which will transform it from a knowledge provider to a leader of social cultural changes. Accordingly, the academic world must adapt practice and learning to include the development of a road set of skills that will meet current and future professional needs, requirements and changing challenges (Hurrell, 2016; Krauss, Abdullah, Ali, Ortega, Ismail, Dahalan & Ariffin, 2016; Reiss, 2019; Tadmor, 2016), some of which are not necessarily currently known. Under the current COVID- 19 crisis, the ability to cope with changes, including those related to distance learning, as well as broader changes in the employment horizon, is an opportunity to adapt contents and delivery forms to the needs of the 21st century.

Recently, the researchers have developed an experimental and unique tool that is taught online in various digital platforms. The tool is based on the Bar-On (2006) framework of EI which includes skills

organized under 5 major categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress-tolerance, adaptability and general mood, that are related to coping and success in different countries and has been noted particularly suitable for academic institutions (Drew, 2006). The tool enables the development of emotional-social skills in existing academic courses, along with the academic learning in the course. In addition, it enables the construction of a modular program of a variety of social-emotional skills, which can be implemented as part of the academic institution's strategy. The model was developed with a holistic view of student development and the skills they need in a changing world identified internationally.

2. Model for implementing soft skills

The soft skills implementation model is tailored for development of a range of emotional-social skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, self-regard, assertiveness, empathy, and interpersonal communication (Bar-On, 2006). The model places the development of social-emotional skills as an integral part of the learning in the course, ties them to course topics. And accompanies students throughout on a course of their independent learning and development while guiding and evaluating the developmental outcomes.

The development of the skills included in the model can be assimilated and adapted to any course and at various levels of study, flexibly and in different manners. In addition, the model is formative: focused on the process and not on the outcome; It allows for personal progress and examines students' personal development in relation to their starting point and personal needs and goals. Formative evaluation and feedback processes are aimed at students' continuous development. The model can also be applied to various synchronous or asynchronous digital learning platforms as it does not require frontal lessons. Thus, is specifically suitable for the COVID-19 times.

Based on the model, a teaching methodology and unique tool have been developed,

The tool includes research-based and theory-based assignments designed to develop a each of a variety of social-emotional skills, which were found effective in enhancing the specific skills. The assignments are organized modularly from the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the ability, to examining its connections to the topic and study subjects, identification of the student's own ability and individual development tasks. It includes tasks such as: watching a short lecture, reading a relevant article etc. (in the theoretical stage); identifying starting point and setting goals (in

the reflective stage); and activities where there are tasks for developing the skill (in the application stage)

The methodology for applying the tool includes four steps, with interface points between the lecturer and students. The first two stages are planning and launching; in which the lecturer selects one of a variety of social-emotional skills based on the degree of relevance to the course topic. For example, empathy may be selected to stand in the focus of a patient-therapist relationship course, or self-regard in a difficult engineering class. The lecturer then plans the points in which the discussion of the skill and its relevance will be integrated in the course materials.

At the beginning of the course, the lecturer introduces the concept of social-emotional skills, their importance for the profession and their relevance for the course subject. The lecturer then introduces the tool, and the way it will be integrated in the course.

Preforming the developmental assignments is based on self-directed work of students and weekly progress – from task to task. It is recommended that: a) assignments are at a continuation of one another; b) are opened after the previous assignment has been completed; c) the order will be kept in parallel to course content. The flexibility of the model is reflected in instructors' ability to make changes to model application and use of the tool. Examples for possible changes are: using only some of the steps; changing the scope of tasks; selecting preferred tasks from an existing task repository; adding or replacing tasks.

The tool combines formative assessments in the form of feedback and support for students' personal development at least in two points over the online course: one, when setting goals and objectives, the other, at the end of the development phase. The feedback is particularly important since learning and development is largely independent. the formative assessment focuses on the degree of dedication and investment in the process, on the demonstration of understanding of the skill and its relevance to the topic being studied, and on reflective ability regarding the process, personal starting point, goals and progress. Evaluations can also be carried out online.

3. Summary

In light of global changes and challenges that accompany academia and teaching following the COVID-19 crisis and the more general global changes. The importance of social-emotional skills development as part of equipping students to 21st century requirements has been increasingly

acknowledged. Thus, integrating soft skills development processes into the curriculum, including in distance learning is of high importance.

This paper proposes a model and tool for developing these skills using distance learning platforms and without the need for major changes in the curriculum and teaching methods, making it more applicable and practical in the current reality.

Although research evidence of the effectiveness of the tool is at an early stage, we believe that using integrative learning methodologies such as the one described, in conjunction with distance learning, will bring academia and graduates closer to a better match to 21st century reality and its requirements. Furthermore, although designed in Israel, the tool is based on wide international model and research evidence and thus can be suitable to academic institutions internationally. Developing social-emotional skills can enhance resilience in times of the COVID-19 pandemic but also prepare students for the changes and challenges ahead. In order to maximize effectiveness, it is recommended that the development of social-emotional skills will be integrated as part of higher education institutions' strategy and that the integration will include faculty training, as faculty's own social emotional skills, their acknowledgment of its importance and their confidence in using the tool are key to a meaningful change.

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