

BEYOND CURRICULUM: EMBEDDING LIFE SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The gap between the needs of the industry and aspirations of the academic community is very large and it is widely held that knowledge, skills, and resourcefulness of people are critical to sustain economic development and social activity in a knowledge-driven society. Given the current high-paced growth and dynamic investment climate in India, the demand for knowledge workers with high levels of technical and soft skills is increasing day by day. Institutions of the 21 century resemble a corporate organization. Universities are miniature industries generating human resources. Human resources with positive attitude towards life and work and germane skills for advanced knowledge economy are becoming important in today's high momentum, globalised society. Life skills, also termed as psycho- social skills, empower individuals to flourish and prosper in the competitive world and adapt to the environment in which they live in. It is important that we need to mobilize skills such as personal management and people management which help us to steer our life towards more positive behavior and well-being. This paper is designed to throw light on various aspects of Life Skills Training, which is an emerging concept in the higher education sector.

Key words: Life Skills, People management, Adaptive and positive behavior, Participatory learning

INTRODUCTION

The education industry is one of the fastest developing sectors worldwide, generating large scale revenues and employment. All are seeking to improve their institutions, and to respond better to higher social and economic expectations. With the changing scenario and economy, the education sector no more comprises the traditional institutions, especially in the developed communities. The demand of the situation is such that one cannot solely depend on the traditional methods of teacher-centered instruction and school management. While education in such institutions is much beyond the class-room teaching, the focus is on skill development among learners.

Life skills have been defined as "the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. "(WHO). "Adaptive' means that a person is flexible in approach and is able to adjust to his environment under different circumstances. 'Positive behaviour' implies that a person is forward-looking and can find a ray of hope even in difficult situations. The terms 'Livelihood skills' or occupational vocational skills refer to capabilities, resources and opportunities to pursue individual and household economic goals and relate to income generation. Thus, Life skills are distinct from Livelihood skills.

According to UNESCO, "Life Skills are a group of cognitive personal and interpersonal abilities that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner."

Life skills include psycho-social competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with managing their lives in a healthy and productive manner. There are two kinds of skills -those related to thinking termed as 'thinking skills'; and skills related to dealing with others termed as 'social skills'. While thinking skills relate to reflection at a personal level, social skills include interpersonal skills and do not necessarily depend on logical thinking. It is the combination of these two types of skills that are needed for achieving assertive behaviour and negotiating effectively. 'Emotion handling' can be perceived as a skill not only in making rational decisions but also in being able to make others agree to one's point of view. To do that, coming to terms first with oneself is important. Thus, self-management is an important skill including managing/coping with feelings, emotions, stress and resisting peer and family pressure.

Core Life Skills to be instilled in Students

The Ten core Life Skills as laid down by WHO are:

1. Self-awareness
2. Empathy
3. Critical thinking
4. Creative thinking
5. Decision-making
6. Problem-solving
7. Effective communication
8. Interpersonal relationship
9. Coping with stress
10. Coping with emotion

Self-awareness includes recognition of 'self', our character, our strengths and weaknesses, desires and dislikes. It is often a prerequisite to effective communication and interpersonal relations, as well as for developing empathy with others.

Empathy is the ability to imagine what life is like for another person. Without empathy, our communication with others may result in one-way traffic. Empathy can help us to accept others, who may be very different from ourselves.

Critical thinking is an ability to analyze information and experiences in an objective manner. Critical thinking helps us to recognize and assess the factors that influence attitudes and behaviour, such as values, peer pressure and the media.

Creative thinking is a novel way of seeing or doing things that is characteristic of four components - fluency (generating new ideas), flexibility (shifting perspective easily), originality (conceiving of something new), and elaboration (building on other ideas).

Decision making helps us to deal constructively with decisions about our lives. It can teach people how to make decisions actively about their actions in relation to healthy assessment of different options and, what effects these different decisions are likely to have.

Problem solving helps us to deal constructively with problems in our lives. Significant problems that are left unrescued can cause mental stress and give rise to physical strain.

Interpersonal relationship skills help us to relate in positive ways with the people we interact with. This may mean being able to make and keep friendly relationships, which can be of great importance to our mental and social well-being.

Effective communication means that we are able to express ourselves, both verbally and non-verbally, in ways that are appropriate to our cultures and situations. This means being able to express opinions and desires, and also needs and fears.

Coping with stress means recognizing the sources of stress in our lives, recognizing how this affects us, and acting in ways that help us control our levels of stress, by changing our environment or lifestyle and learning how to relax.

Coping with emotions means involving recognizing emotions within us and others, being aware of how emotions influence behaviour and being able to respond to emotions appropriately.

WHAT SHOULD OUR UNIVERSITIES DO?

Life Skills Training Programmes in Universities should aim at the following:

- ✓ To teach how to gain a positive self-esteem. Positive self-esteem can enable an individual to face any obstacle. With high self-esteem, one can counter the most disappointing and discouraging situations with faith, hope, and courage. The primary difference between winners and losers is attitude. Winners define their goals; losers make excuses.
- ✓ To teach the art of self-management-It is a person's willpower, strong determination and sharp focus on goals. These, when supplemented with sincere hard work, help to realize one's dream. One thing which needs to be noticed is that, a person with self-management will always maintain inner tranquility and stillness no matter what may be the outer circumstances.
- ✓ To teach the art and science of goal-setting. Most of the things that make life worth-living require careful introspection, sufficient time to develop, and plenty of hard work. Setting goals and consistently striving towards them is the only way to succeed in life.
- ✓ To teach the fundamentals of leadership- Leaders are made, not born. Even if a person doesn't want to pursue a career that is traditionally thought of as requiring leadership, he can certainly benefit from knowing how to persuade, influence, and negotiate with others.
- ✓ To enlighten on the importance of fiscal literacy and stewardship-It is necessary that an individual must learn how to manage money for long-term prosperity. Knowing how to save, invest, avoid bad debt and making sound financial decisions is necessary for a successful life.
- ✓ To instruct on the importance of health and fitness-Nothing is more central to quality of life than quality of health. There's no point in having a brilliant, purposeful career if one doesn't feel healthy enough to enjoy it.
- ✓ To teach the basics of time management.-Time is the greatest treasure that one can have. If a person doesn't make a wise decision to invest it in the pursuit of his goals and objectives, he can never succeed in life.

HOW CAN LIFE SKILLS BE IMPARTED?

The method used in teaching of Life Skills builds upon the social learning theory and on what we know of how young people learn from their environment; from observing how others behave and what consequences arise from behaviour. It involves the process of Participatory learning using 4 basic components:

1. Practical activities
2. Feedback and reflections
3. Consolidation and reinforcement
4. Practical application to day-to-day life challenges

Life Skills Training Programme in Govt. First Grade Colleges- A Review

During the Academic Year 2009-10, the Department of Collegiate Education, Govt. of Karnataka, launched a novel initiative called 'Sahayog' to impart various skills to the undergraduate students studying in Govt. First Grade Colleges, 'Sahayog' is a concept having the primary objective to improve the employability of undergraduate students of Government Colleges by imparting training to them in vocational and life skills. This project is intended to develop creativity, critical thinking, interpersonal and personal management skills that are very much needed to prepare the students to face the challenges of life. The project is implemented in joint collaboration with the Department of Collegiate Education (DCE) and Karnataka Vocational Training and Skill Development Corporation (KVTSDC). A manual on life skill has been prepared both in English and Kannada and given to the students.

The first phase of project was implemented during the Academic Year 2009-10 in which nearly 7000 students from 112 Government colleges of the State were trained. After this successful endeavor, in the second phase 15,000 students from 223 Government First Grade Colleges of the State opted for training. Of the total 120 hours of training, 80 hours are spent on imparting vocational skills training and the remaining 40 hours are spent on giving life skill training to the participants.

Through a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) corporate training agencies that understand the skill requirements in companies have been selected to impart training. Sessions are specially designed to impart a particular skill and involve some or all of the following techniques:

- ✓ Class discussions
- ✓ Brainstorming
- ✓ Demonstration and guided practice
- ✓ Role plays
- ✓ Audio and visual presentations-e.g., arts, music, theatre, dance
- ✓ Educational games and simulations
- ✓ Case studies
- ✓ Story-telling
- ✓ Debates

The peer training approach was also followed. As a result, the trainees were found to have developed certain skills like communication skills, interaction skills, critical thinking skills etc. which enabled them to seek employment in companies with new enthusiasm and hope. The job fairs that followed the training in various places saw a large number of students being placed with reputed companies with good packages. It has generated a lot of interest among government college students, especially from the rural belts. There is a new found confidence and zeal among them. Encouraged by the success and overwhelming response from various stakeholders, the Department is now entering the third phase of this venture. This is a clear evidence to show that learners are eager to receive life skills training and that such a training enhances various skills and prepares them to accept challenges in life

CONCLUSION

Education is the key to the task of nation-building as well as to provide requisite knowledge and skills required for sustained growth of these individuals with the overall progress. Universities must produce individuals with the ability to continually learn, think critically and logically, to be reflective and reflexive, to innovate and break the status quo, and to navigate in the unstable waters of the global economy.

Educational institutions must attempt to equip the learners with the skills and information for their personal and professional development. Life Skills Training should be developed as a training program which helps the learners to take the right decisions, solve the problems and take care of their relationship and cope with the adversities. This type of training will help them to discharge their professional and personal responsibilities in an effective manner. Life Skills play an important role in determining a person's personality. While enhancing social competence, they complement the technical skills that an individual acquires through the process of education and training.

Training individuals for the future and allowing them to visualize what is possible for them will not only make a difference in their lives but will enrich the society now and for the future. Needless to say, Life Skills Training provides a hefty dose of real world pragmatism.

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