

TECHNOLOGY IN PEDAGOGY: TEACHING SOFT SKILLS TO MARKETING STUDENTS ONLINE

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ABSTRACT

Students are graduating b-school with more than adequate hard skills, but that they are lacking a certain professional polish. They are devoid of interpersonal skills, listening skills, reasoning, loyalty, attention to personal appearance, etc. Research indicates that American's universities are commonly graduating students void of soft skills and sending them directly into industry (Stovall 2009). According to Dana, Hancock, and Philips (2011), "...research from the private and public sector in both academic and workplaces indicates that the lack of soft skills among our college graduates is alarming". And although many types of business students lack soft skills when entering the workforce, this is especially true of first generation college students and students from working class backgrounds (Jamison 2010).

To attempt to close the gap on this issue, I created an experimental course entitled "Soft Skills in Hard Times" – an online class designed to teach students those soft skills they just weren't receiving in other business classes. Though naysayers questioned the ability for students to learn such intangible material via online delivery, results of both a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the course showed it was a success.

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Students are graduating business college with more than adequate hard skills, but that they are lacking a certain professional polish. They are devoid of interpersonal skills, listening skills, reasoning, loyalty, attention to personal appearance, etc. Research indicates that American's universities are commonly graduating students void of soft skills and sending them directly into industry (Stovall 2009). According to Dana, Hancock, and Philips (2011), "...research from the private and public sector in both academic and workplaces indicates that the lack of soft skills among our college graduates is alarming". And although many types of business students lack soft skills when entering the workforce, this is especially true of first generation college students and students from working class backgrounds (Jamison 2010).

To attempt to close the gap on this issue, I created an experimental course entitled "Soft Skills in Hard Times" – an online class designed to teach students those soft skills they just weren't receiving in other business classes. Though naysayers questioned the ability for students to learn such intangible material via online delivery, results of both a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the course showed it was a success.

COURSE COMPONENTS

The course was taught completely online, with the exception of one [mandatory] in-person session: A business dining etiquette luncheon. The class was divided into two parts: Self-management skills and people skills. The topics taught are listed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Self-Management Skills

- Work Ethic
- Communication Skills: Listening, Speaking, Body language
- Communication Skills: Writing, Presenting, Elevator pitch
- Personal Effectiveness: Likability, Smile, Personal brand, Appearance, Authenticity
- Personal Effectiveness: Sense of humor, Personal energy, Eye contact, Posture
- Dependability, Conscientiousness, Responsibility, Integrity, Flexibility
- Stress management, Time management, Procrastination
- Respect, Criticism: Accepting it, Learning from it, Giving it

People Skills

- Dining: Dining etiquette, Wine selection; Handshake
- Business Etiquette: Email, cell phone. Job search Info: Facebook profile, salary negotiation, Gen Y on the job market; Dealing with difficult bosses
- Part 1: Fundamental Techniques in Handling People
- Part 2: Six Ways to Make People Like You
- Part 3: How to Win People to Your Way of Thinking (PERSUASION)
- Part 4: Be a Leader: How to Change People Without Giving Offense or Arousing Resentment
- Teamwork, Cultural sensitivity, Networking

The course utilized the learning management system Desire2Learn. Students were required to log in at least twice per week; course materials were posted Monday mornings at 12:00am and students had until Sunday night at 11:59pm to complete the assignments. Each week contained content for the learning module in the form of written notes pages, PowerPoint slides, podcasts, videos, photographs, and/or required reading from the textbook, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie. After reading/watching/listening to the course content, students would then complete a required blog post answering several topic-related questions. Following the blog post, students would then choose to complete one or more of the posted activities and post a comment about it/them on the discussion board. (Reading all discussion board posts was a requirement of the course.) After completing the discussion board requirement, there was a weekly quiz to test the student on the week's material. Figure 2 shows sample content from one of the learning modules.

Figure 2

- **Week 2: Communication Skills: Listening, Speaking, Body Language**
Please blog the following:
 - How did you assess on the [Listening Skills Survey](#)? How did you feel about your score? Are your listening skills where you want them to be?
 - What are some things you are going to try to increase your listening skills?
 - What are some [body language tips](#) you are going to remember after this class has ended?
 - Then, perform and respond to one (or both) of the following communication skills activities on the discussion board. As always, feel free to comment/reply to others' posts.
- **Activity 1: Listening**
Choose [one](#) or [two](#) of the [listening strategies/tips](#) (given in this week's course material) that you don't currently do when listening to someone. Try them out and report back your results. Did you feel awkward? Did it help you become a better listener? Will you continue to do this in the future? How did you feel? More importantly, how do you think the speaker felt?
- **Activity 2: Body Language**
Go to a café or other location where people are conversing for longer periods of time. Observe (for about 15 minutes) a couple or a group of people sitting at the same table. Position yourself to where you can't hear the conversation. Now analyze their body language. According to the [tutorial](#) posted this week, what can you tell me about the people and the conversation?

Grading for the course was as follows: Business dining etiquette luncheon (10%), 15 blog entries (20%), 15 quizzes (50%), participation (10%), and final exam (10%).

BUSINESS DINING ETIQUETTE LUNCHEON

The required in-person session, the business dining etiquette luncheon, was held at California Café in Los Gatos, in a private room. This lesson is best taught in person and not online. Students first had the week's material delivered online, but in addition to that, an in-person practice of the material was warranted. This way, I could correct their mistakes as they were being performed.

Servers laid out all of the utensils (including dessert spoons/forks) and all the beverage glasses ahead of time. The layout was intentionally intimidating to students who hadn't formally dined before. The luncheon began with an hors d'oeuvres mixer where the students practiced moving in and out of conversations gracefully. They also wore name tags on their left lapel so they recognized each other while practicing firm handshakes. Students practiced holding beverage glasses and hors d'oeuvre plates in the same hand so they could perform these handshakes without looking for a table to set down their food. During this time, I critiqued their business attire and offered constructive criticism to those who needed it. After the mixer, students sat down to dine on a 3 course meal. I walked around the room and critiqued their behavior, based on that week's unit they learned in class. I also reiterated points of interest and discussed things like proper topics to discuss during a business dinner or during a dining interview. During the meal, a sommelier at the restaurant, conducted a wine tasting lesson to those who were interested and had a valid ID showing they were of age. For those who didn't/couldn't drink wine, I offered to let them examine (look at and sniff) the glasses of red and white wine so they could follow along. Students were taught what to look for, what to sniff for, how to swirl and taste a glass of wine. I also went through the process of ordering a bottle of wine so they knew what to expect when shown the bottle, the cork, and given a sample. This was to cut down on the intimidation factor of wine should they encounter it in a business setting.

For the students who couldn't make the [mandatory] luncheon due to work or other circumstances (also, given this is an online class), they were given a little over one week to complete a written assignment and activity on business dining etiquette. In this assignment, they also submitted photos of themselves demonstrating certain skills, such as napkin and utensil placement during the meal and at rest.

QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT

An identical pretest and posttest were conducted before and after the course. Twelve students completed both tests. (As there were 24 students enrolled, this indicated a 50% response rate.) They were asked several questions to take an inventory of their soft skills. A 3-point scale was offered for students to indicate how easily specific soft skills came to them, 1 = not at all, 2 = somewhat, 3 = very easily. Figure 6 shows the 20 questions offered in the Soft Skills Inventory Survey.

Figure 3

1. Listening to someone's questions or comment before responding
2. Listening to the needs and ideas of others with respect and openness.
3. Participating in goal setting and planning process.
4. Valuing everyone's input.
5. Encouraging cooperation between peers.
6. Stepping in to resolve conflicts.
7. Handling resistance well.
8. Giving criticism kindly.
9. Quickly accommodate to hanging conditions.
10. Setting boundaries in positive ways.
11. Giving praise freely.
12. Not abusing others' time (i.e., lateness, delays, etc.)
13. Ignoring private phone calls or text messages at work.
14. Making eye contact 60-70% of the time while talking to someone.
15. Relaying information to my superiors in a concise manner without being wordy or veering off topic.
16. Feeling comfortable at a business dinner.
17. Persuading people to your viewpoint.
18. Displaying cultural sensitivity.
19. Ability to "go with the flow" when an employer makes changes.
20. Choosing a wine to go with a business dinner.

A paired t-test was performed on each pre/post question. The results are shown in Figures 7, 8, and 9. Note the differences between means indicated with one asterisk are significant to 0.1, two asterisks are significant to 0.05, and three asterisks are significant to 0.01.

Figure 4

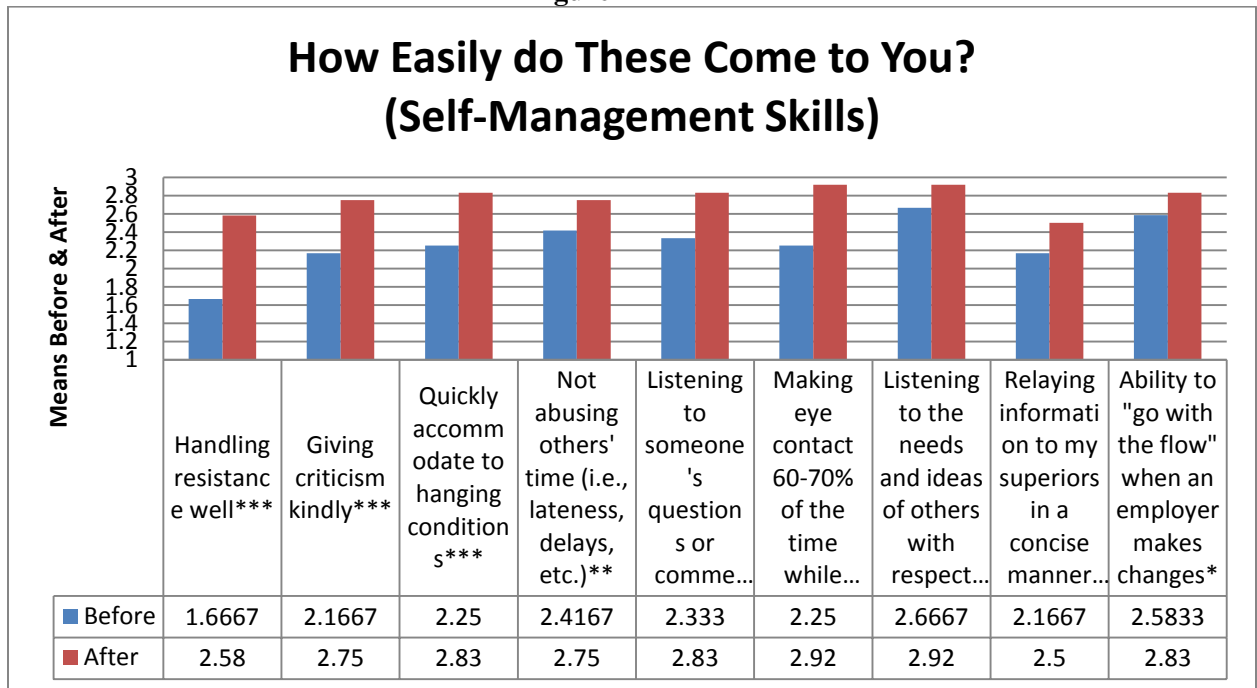


Figure 5

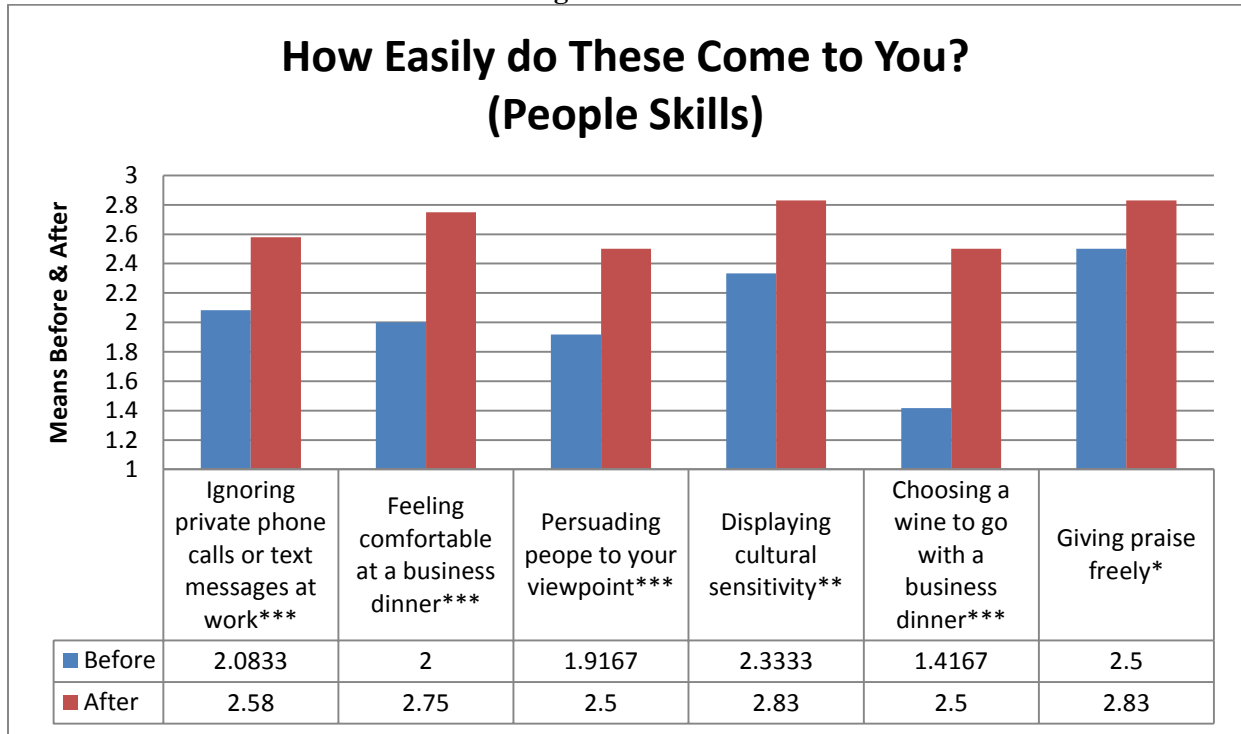
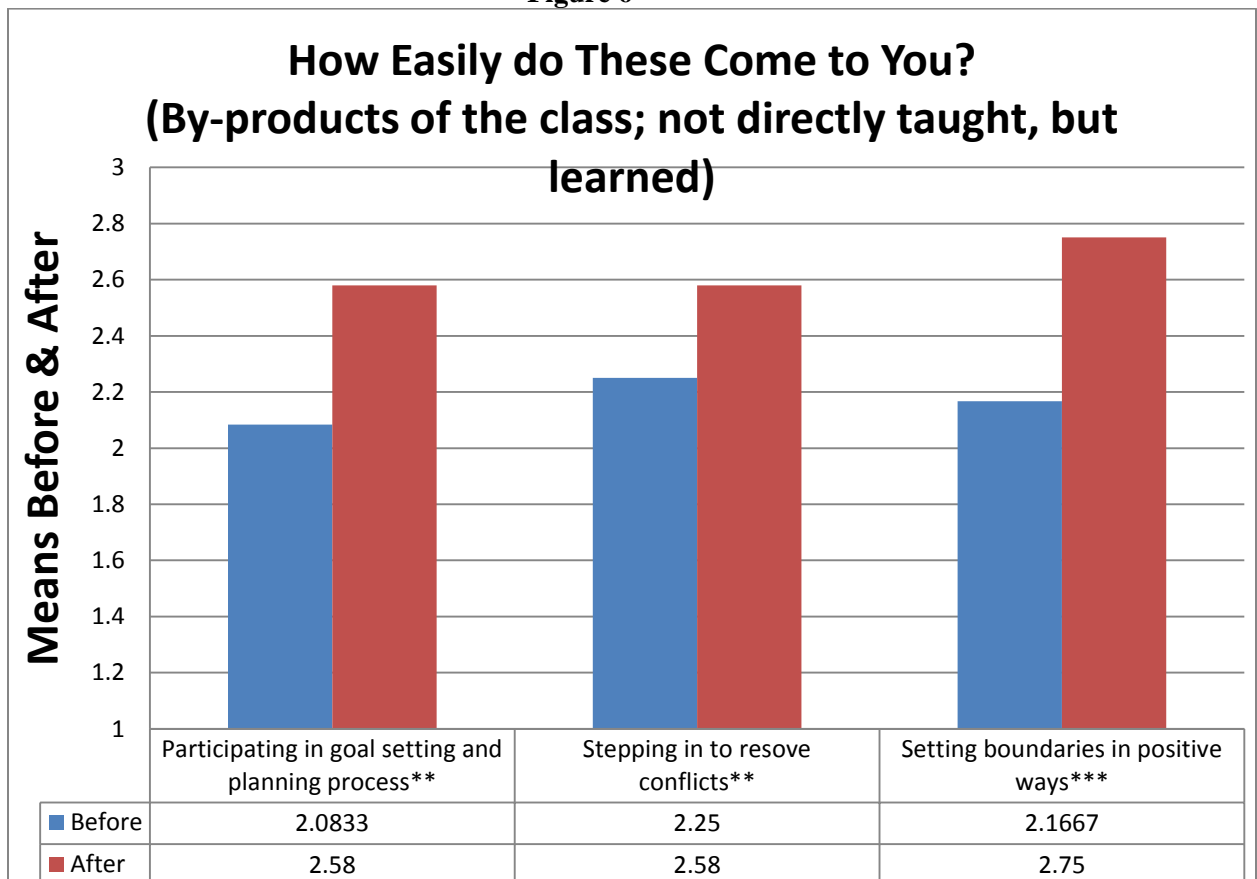


Figure 6



LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations to the empirical assessment. First, not all of the students took the pre/posttest Soft Skills Inventory Survey as I did not make it mandatory. Second, the response choice scale contained far too few scale points which may have contributed to inflated results. Third, the questions chosen for the inventory survey were selected prior to the development of the course content. Hence questions were asked of things I did not teach, and many things I taught in the course were not asked on the survey. Note, I am currently teaching this course again this semester (Fall 2012), and I have remedied these issues.

DISCUSSION

Although the limitations of the 3 points scale don't allow for obtaining an accurate representation of the degree of knowledge students acquired during this course, it is very evident that they did, in fact, increase their soft skills in each area tested. The areas of greatest improvement were ignoring private phone calls/text messages at work, feeling comfortable at a business dinner, choosing a wine to go with a business dinner, setting boundaries in positive ways, handling resistance well, quickly accommodate to having situations, listening to someone's questions or comments before responding, and making eye contact 60-70% of the time while talking to someone. Interestingly, setting boundaries in positive ways, participating in the goal setting and planning process, and stepping in to resolve conflicts were the only items not taught directly through the course material or activities, yet students noticed a marked improvement in these areas. Post-hoc analysis indicates they were by-products of the class, taught indirectly through the material.

QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT

Having subscribed to student posts on Desire2Learn, every post (in real time) piped directly into my iPhone. I was quite shocked to read the responses to class activities from each of my students. Most of my students were implementing what they learned in their personal and professional lives as soon as it was taught to them and they were noticing real changes in their lives. I had every intention on students carrying the course's information with them as they graduated and searched for jobs, but I never expected they take so quickly and positively to the lessons learned. It felt as if they were hungry for this knowledge and had been waiting for a lifetime for it. Below are three randomly selected exercises/activities required of my course followed by a student post on the class discussion board in response to the exercise to exemplify my point. There were many, many posts similar to these each week. It was inspiring.

Exercise 1

Choose one or two of the listening strategies/tips (given in this week's course material) that you don't currently do when listening to someone. Try them out and report back your results. Did you feel awkward? Did it help you become a better listener? Will you continue to do this in the future? How did you feel? More importantly, how do you think the speaker felt?

"My job requires that I interact with clients all day, every day. I decided to use a listening skill suggestion, and begin taking notes while the client was talking to me. At first I thought that I would feel uncomfortable, but I received great results. While taking notes I noticed that the clients would repeat the details that the most important, so I can write it down. This would give me the opportunity to recap on the most important points that the client's were relaying to me. I also noticed that client's [sic] would open up more, because they didn't want to leave out any details because they knew I was taking notes. I will use this listening technique every time I meet with a client, and believe that this will change my practice." ~Franklin M.

Exercise 2

Offer somebody (coworker or classmate, preferably) constructive criticism using the tips you were provided in the videos and notes. How did you deliver the news and what was the person's response?

"I went to a interview for a potential internship. They asked me to critic [sic] their product (an application). I used the techniques given in the video and the feedback notes. I first pointed out something positive about the product then continued by describing what I saw could be potential issues. I was extremely nice throughout the entire time and explained in detail what I thought so there was no room for misinterpretation. I definitely didn't make it personal. I also provided some suggestions to improve the product from my point of view. They were very grateful for my input and I think it went very well."
~Sabrina-Mone L.

Exercise 3

Principle 4 of Part II of HTWF&IP is "Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves." Find someone of importance (your manager, your professor, your mentor, a local businessman, etc.) and encourage them to talk about themselves as Dale Carnegie suggests. This can be about their success, their opinion, their experience, their struggles, etc. Ask open-ended questions and then just listen. You are not only to glean knowledge for yourself, but also give them a feeling of importance. How long did the conversation last? Did the person talking seem to enjoy sharing information with you about himself/herself? How do you feel about that person now? How do you think that person feels about you now?

"I asked a mentor of mine to meet me for coffee this morning, just to go over my resume and a few other things. I went in with the intention of asking her questions, and seeing how she was doing-just sitting there, listening and absorbing all the information! We ended up meeting for almost 2 hours and I decided to save my resume for another time. I asked her about work, and how she was feeling regarding certain projects. I asked her more questions that weren't work related. She seemed relax and almost tickled to be talking about her whole journey. I learned so much more about her, and it made me respect her even more than I already do. She's quite amazing! At the end of our conversation, she smiled, and said, "I needed that." ~Alexis M.

Unsolicited Posts at Semester's End

After the course had ended, I was surprised to see several students had returned to the discussion board to post their opinions on the course. Here are two quotes that exemplify the opinions in those posts.

"I don't know if you're still reading, but I just wanted to thank you. I am glad I was able to take this class my last semester at SJSU. I know there are plenty of things I don't know and every day I will be learning something new, but I just feel like I needed this class. I can't attest how it has helped me professionally but in my personal relationships I can definitely see growth. It's helping me become a better friend, sister, daughter, and hopefully co-worker. I hope there will be many more students who will be able to take this course with you in the future. I only borrowed the book for this class but I'm going to get my own copy now. Thank you again and have a wonderful summer!!!" ~Michelle E.
"I want to personally tell you that I appreciate you making this course possible and available as an option for me this semester, as I have learned much more than I ever would have expected going into the class. Your weekly modules and discussions have made a lasting impression on me. They have really given me a change in perspective on

how I approach people, business situations, and even myself to a large degree. Honestly, I've always struggled in the confidence department, (even though I try to put up a good front) but I feel that the exercises that you had us do made a huge difference in how I generally present myself now. I've noticed an improvement in my speaking abilities and to my surprise, I've actually received a few positive comments about this. It's a good feeling!

I can truly say that this has been one of favorite classes at SJSU, and quite possibly the most valuable of all. (I think we should all petition for this course to be mandatory for ALL Business majors!) I am already using what I have learned here and applying it to my job and my relationships, and I am anticipating the benefits of using it throughout my career. So again, thank you for being an approachable, knowledgeable, good-natured professor; it has helped make a concrete difference in my life.” ~Keli'i W.

DISCUSSION

The many inspirational posts of lessons currently being utilized in the students' lives indicate the positive effect this course had on them. The unsolicited opinions from the students at the end of the course indicate how very hungry they were for this information. Although the quantitative assessment shows something was, in fact, learned, it is the qualitative assessment that shows *what* was learned and *how* it changed students' lives. The three randomly selected exercise posts don't begin to scratch the surface of how much students seemed to benefit from this course, but it gives an indication. The quote from Exercise 3 regarding the discussion with the student's mentor gives a bit of insight into how this course might affect employers, and the quote from Exercise 1 regarding the listening technique utilized at the student's place of employment gives a bit of insight into how this course might affect business-client relationships for companies. Though critics worried this class could not possibly be taught as an online course, Soft Skills in Hard Times seemed to do exactly as it was intended.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This course in soft skills is not a course which requires memorization of formulas or crunching of numbers, yet it is rigorous in its own way. Students must take the time to look at things they may take for granted or let go unnoticed. They must make an introspective look at themselves and assess who they are and who they want to be. They are given activities to put their newly acquired knowledge to practical use in their current lives, which is unlike most classes taught in college. Most courses teach information students hope to one day use when they start on their career track; my course allows students to start making changes now. They have to develop their personal brand. They not only learn about themselves, but they learn about how others view them. This class fills a desperate need in the business world – the need for employees you *want* to be your coworker.

Many people had doubts that this course could be taught online. Soft skills are difficult to teach in general, but naysayers especially questioned the ability for students to absorb this sort of information via online delivery. Both the qualitative and quantitative assessment data showed this course's effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As an online course, the course should utilize various forms of media: notes pages, audio, online/offline activities, video, etc. in order to keep student interest and to reach all learning styles. With every new unit, students should be required to evaluate their current skills, implement what they've learned, and reflect on its impact.

This course should be taught in all business concentrations, not just marketing.

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