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**The effectiveness of teaching life skills in  
universities**

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# **The effectiveness of teaching life skills in universities**

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## 1. Teaching life skills in Vietnam:

As in definition of life skills by UNICEF, life skills include cognitive skills, practical skills, personal and social skills. Life skills as defined by the WHO are “abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life”. Life skills are psycho-social skills including problem-solving and critical thinking skills, personal skills such as self-awareness, and interpersonal skills. Possessing life skills means having qualities such as high self-esteem, sociability, tolerance, action competencies to generate change, capabilities to have the freedom to decide what to do and who to be. Life skills are therefore different from health skills or practical skills, livelihood skills (SelfGrowth.com, 2009).

During the past few years, demand for life skills training is increasing at high speed in Vietnam. The term “life skills” has become familiar and well heard of. Life skill courses draw attention from a wide range of population such as college students, or young employees to parents who are looking for life skills courses for their children. With such a demand, life skill courses can be found easily, especially in big cities like Hochiminh City or Hanoi. These courses cover several aspects or dimensions of life skills, such as communication skill, public speaking skill, to creative thinking skill, decision making skill.

Life skill courses in Vietnam are offered to a wide range of age. Several life skill courses offered by Fastrackids, MARPLE- BEAR, John Robert Power in Hochiminh City are designed for young kids, and receive welcome from parents who wish their kids can be equipped with the capabilities of setting goals for themselves, understanding who they are in relation to friends, families, interacting with others. Psychologists say these programs can empower a child the ability to develop his personality, recognize the potentials in each child, and develop other life skills ranging from goal setting, presentation skill, communication skill, or teach moral lessons, and even how to use household facilities such as computers, telephones. Parents gradually turn their attention from English or music lessons, but to life skill classes (Huynh, 2009).

Life skill courses are also offered to adults, especially to young people. For example, club *Den Voi nhau* (*Come together Club*) in Hochiminh City is a meeting place for professionals in life skills training and young people to meet and discuss about life skills and how to educate people in this area (Thai Binh, 2009).

Teaching life skills are paid attention to by some schools in Hochiminh City. However, they are not taught as a formal subject, but are offered in form of discussion sessions or games on certain topics. So the courses are a chance to relax and students can pick up some tips on life skills.

Tuition fee at training centers specializing in this area are too expensive to be affordable to the majority of people. Hochiminh city's state-run convention centers or youth clubs are the major venues for classes on life skills at the affordable price to most people. Lessons on life skills are given to a big number of participant in one class. Therefore, practicing and activities are missing in general, which significantly affect on the quality and effectiveness of these courses. (Thai Binh, 2009)

One example is a course on "Life skills" offered by the Youth Center in Hochiminh City started in September 2007. This course offers lessons on analysis skills, how to react to varied life situations, stress management, managing feelings, self-awareness and self-evaluation. Being organized for the first time, this three-month course is limited to just a small number of excellent students of some highschoools in Hochiminh City (Anh Van, 2007).

Companies and training centers jump into the competition to provide life skills courses. Life skills are broadly advertised as "indispensable skills for life" and this draws even more people into taking these classes. Learners believe that life skill courses can prepare them to cope with many difficult situations in life, and the more life skills courses they take, the more stable they can be. Vietnam's formal education has focused only on teaching knowledge, and neglected to provide life skills training. Together with the increasing demand of the society for competent workers, people rush to take life skill classes offered by many training centers booming during the past recent years. Curricula of these training centers are quite similar to each other, and they teach skills such as group work, communication skills, to understanding the feelings of others, etc. These courses are provided at considerably high cost. Cheaper courses provided by public centers are mainly in the form of discussion between facilitators and learners. In many training centers, facilitators only tell their life stories hoping that learners can learn from them with little relating to theory. Since life stories of every individual are very different, learners might never face the same situation in the trainers' stories in their lives. Some trainers neglect the fact that theory is crucial in teaching life skills because with the knowledge, learners can apply to the situation that he faces to solve it in a rational way.

Most of the courses on life skills are given to young adults, or new employees and focus on business setting. For example, courses at the Youth Club of Hochiminh City are on: communication skills, how to change the way of thinking in order to lead happy life, sales strategies, how to manage a projects. In this market of life skill courses, learning skill or study skill are paid very little attention to compared with skills on social and psychological domain.

## **2. Teaching life skills at schools**

Students, especially those in tertiary education where teaching and study methods are very different from that in high-schools, are reported to have very insufficient knowledge of learning skills. Classes teaching study skills are completely missing in training programs not only in training centers, but also in schools and universities.

Students meet with a lot of difficulties when entering universities. A lot of students face challenges in managing their study during their transitions from highschools where teachers do not demand students to take lecture notes, or to give presentations or to work in group, to a more active learning environment as in college. Some universities are alerted by the big number of students who apply for cancelling courses, with the reason that they cannot manage their heavy study schedules. For example, in University of Technology and Pedagogy in Hochiminh City, in the second semester of 2007-2008 academic year, 7,000 students applied to quit their classes, and the same trend can be seen in the first semester of 2008-2009 academic year when 6,000 students quit their classes. Teachers of universities usually complain about students' lack of self-study ability. Students usually wait for others to arrange their study schedule, dictate the classnotes, and assign homework to them. This habits cause them trouble when they move to a new study environment as in university where they are supposed to have to arrange time for cramming exams, reading materials by themselves. *(Người Lao Động, April 2009)*

Despite this fact, life skills teaching is seriously missing from universities, except for skills courses required for certain majors, such as public speaking for pedagogy students. Only a few universities and vocational schools include study skills and some life skills courses into their curriculum. Yet, it is not to say that college students do not pay attention to life skills. In fact, many students whose concern about improving life skills and study skills have set up their own circles of

friends and teachers to meet regularly and exchange ideas, or organize activities to learn skills.

Teaching life skills has started to draw the concern of the Ministry of Education and Training. In 2009, Ministry of Education in cooperation with the UNICEF operated a program aiming to train life skills, mostly sex education, to secondary highschool students. The objectives of this course is to train youngster to have a healthy lifestyle, and to provide them with proper understanding about the society and mental health. The target of this program also extends to parents to make them better educators to their children at home (Thu Huong, 2009).

On May 20<sup>th</sup> 2009, the Ministry has held a conference on this theme. In this conference, the importance of teaching life skills for pupils from early is emphasized considering the low competency in coping with life situations and conflicts among Vietnamese youths. Life skills mentioned in this conference range from sex education, to training in stress management, overcoming life difficulties, communication skills, etc. Both the training program specializing in life skills and the qualifications of teachers of this subject were put into discussion although no final conclusion or regulation was made.

Participants also stress that in the long term, it is necessary to build a separate life skills education program for pupils in all the grades of pre-tertiary education. For the time being, the knowledge about these skills should be incorporated into lessons delivered at schools, and be provided to teachers (Tien Dung, 2009).

In order to develop the program effectively, it is first and foremost needed to survey the present knowledge base of the students and design programs suitable to different ages and to specific purposes.

### **3. Research methods**

Taking my advantage as a teacher of College Study Skill in Hoa Sen University, one of the universities advocating teaching life skills in Hochiminh City, I have chosen mainly students and teachers in my school to conduct in-depth interviews about life skill courses they have ever taken, how they think they are changed after those courses, and from where they take up certain life skills they think they are good at. I have also interviewed life skills teachers about how they conduct their classes, and the effects on their students that they hope to exert, and to teachers who are not teaching life skills about whether they incorporate any

training in life skills in their classes. I also interview students from other universities that do not offer any life skill classes, such as Open University of Hochiminh City, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Huflit University, etc, to see whether there is any difference in the confidence in life skills among these students and students at Hoa Sen University.

Although life skills cover a very wide scope of skills as discussed in the earlier part of this paper, in this section, I will give examples of only three skills that are taught in Hoa Sen University: communication skills, critical thinking skills and study skills.

#### **4. How are life skills being taught in universities?**

Life skills are taught using mainly two teaching methods: teaching through theory and teaching through a lot of practices, activities.

In-class activities can be divided into two main types: one is activities that are directly related to the background familiar to students, and another is activities that simulate environments that students are not exposed to yet, such as working places, offices.

*My own class of College study skill is a good example of the first type. Students have to do a variety of activities and homework relating to the skill they study in every lesson. These activities are closely connected to the objectives of the lesson. For instant, for a lesson on Taking note in lectures, students have to practice to take note of TV news, documentaries at home.*

*Teachers of Research methodology classes told me that they assign their students to practice immediately the research steps that are taught in class, for example, students have to write a research proposal when they learn the lesson about writing research proposal.*

In short, activities in these classes are put right in the context that is close to the description in the lesson and at the same time familiar with students, which enables students to practice these skills right at school or at home.

The second type of activities can be found in classes that teach skills more used in the society, rather than in academic context. Teachers of Communication skill

classes shared with me in interviews about the communication scenarios they design to help students learn communication rules. The scenarios these teachers employ usually are in business environment, such as how to encourage a confused customer tell the learner (in role of a salesman) what he is looking for in a shop, or how to cooperate with two partners who has personal dislikes against each other when the learner is in role of a manager, etc.

Besides practice, the theory of the skills are also emphasized. Students can learn skills in communication, research, thinking, studying, etc, from what they experience directly in their daily lives and this process might already start since young ages.

By teaching theory, teachers expect that students can remember what they are taught in classes and turn knowledge into practice in real life. With a lot of practice in real life, new skills can stick with a person to become his habit. Theories taught in skill classes can vary depending on each teacher's perception and belief about the role of practice and theory in helping their students be able to actually apply the skills in real life. Theories are to empower students with the understanding of the rationales behind actions, behaviours, etc, in the other words, to let students know why people behave, learn, communicate, or think in certain ways.

Learning theories together with practicing can also enhance what students already know about certain skills from experience. Many students think that they already know some basic skills such as reading skill, thinking skill, communication skill, but actually their knowledge learned from experience are only partial and applied to limited circumstances. Knowledge they learn from skill classes is more general and thus students can find the use for them in various circumstances.

*The main objectives of Communication Skill courses are to equip students with the theory on principles in communication so that they can handle communication with more understanding about personal psyches and why they react in those certain ways, rather than just following the hunch or habit as before. So when they have a quarrel, students will not judge the interlocutor by his or her reactions, but rather can react by their understanding of that person's temperaments, and motives.*

*Critical thinking skill classes aim not to make students winners in all discussions or debates, but rather make them reason better and know how to examine an object from different perspectives.*

Besides, teaching theories can help students to save time and energy to go through all the failures and learning from failures.

## **5. The effectiveness of teaching life skills**

The effectiveness of teaching life skills can be measured by the extent to which students can actually apply what they learn at school in their life. Teachers aim for effectiveness in both long term and short term.

For long term objectives, students are expected to be able to recall and apply the theory that they learned at school. Some teachers of life skill courses predict this can happen when students are more mature and find the use for skills they have learned in their work and lives, or when they are actually put into the contexts similar to the scenarios practiced in class. Not only teachers, but students I interviewed also emphasize the importance of theory. A student told me that she wishes to attend a class on Public Speaking skill, even though she has experienced enough public speaking opportunities now, she still wants to participate into one class on this subject. She wants to attend a class packed with theory of the steps to give effective presentations.

For short term objectives, teachers expect that the skills they teach in class can be applied right away to fulfill real-life tasks that students face at the present.

*For instant, in one class on Communication Skill, one teacher described to me the various scenarios that she introduced in class to make students discuss or act roles to find out what is the best way to react in those circumstances if they meet the similar situations in real life. According to this teacher, basic etiquettes such as making a phone call, shaking hands are known to all learners without taking Communication skill class. So the teacher rather uses very awkward situations in which no matter how the communicators react, they still have to accept some loss. The key point of conversation hence shifts from merely having a conversation, to how to converse while calculating the gain against the loss and eliminate the loss to the minimum. She also uses clips taken from TV drama series, especially*

*clips that show awkward conversation situations to introduce to the students in class. Most of the scenarios are taken from business context, such as conversation between a manager and his business partner. The teacher hopes that when students face the same situation in real lives, they can have the ability to analyse the reason why it happens the way it does, and react wisely.*

Students are usually bored with lectures packed with too much theory, and they find skill classes are not an exception. Classes of this type tend to include a lot of in-class activities, yet students find these activities are not really helpful because the scenarios or discussion topics are not directly related to their current student life or are rarely encountered in real life.

*One student described to me his Communication skill class. Theories are heavy and conveyed not in a listener-friendly way that gives students hard time to fully concentrate. The scenario is not real to the student because he has never been in the same situation to know how to react appropriately. He thinks he can apply those skills when he starts working in a company.*

Thus, discussion topics, scenarios, in-class activities should be very close to the experience and backgrounds of students and from these experiences, teachers should help students to withdraw lessons, principles for more general cases rather than providing the students with a completely new horizons and students will wonder when they will actually see these cases in real life.

While teachers see the effectiveness of life skills classes in term of the prospect of applicability of skills in the long run, students usually measure the effectiveness by seeing whether the classes help them at all at the present. Their motto is "You learn what you need right now." A group of students said the Communication skill class they took would be of more help if the scenarios teachers make them to discuss about in class are more real to them, more like the daily conversations and situations that they are facing everyday. All the students I interview say they like to take life skill classes that are directly related to what they need to improve at that moment. For example, before entering college, they wished to be equipped with better communication and public speaking skills for they believe that those skills are necessary at college. For students in their senior year, they wish to take classes that teach skills necessary for working life such as communication skill, presentation skill, etc.

The effectiveness of teaching life skills might be decided by various factors, not just by the teacher and how he operates his class.

In the interview, I ask students about the study skills they think they are good at. And when asked from where they learned those skills, students, both those who have taken classes in Study skill and those who have not, all give credit to the experience they are exposed to that makes them master those skills.

More often than not, several life skills including study skill, communication skill, skill of overcoming stress are taught in family or in the environment to which a person is exposed to since childhood. Family guidance is certainly a major implication on a person's adeptness at dealing with various situations in life. This implication is emphasized by both teachers and students in my interview. During the interviews with students, I found out that although family plays a significant role in educating a person with proper social skills, it is not as influencing when it comes to academic and thinking skills. Family usually gives guidance mainly in term of social etiquettes, or appropriate social manners, and not much can be said about other skills such as public speaking, or critical thinking skills.

New skills are also picked up along the way. The changing environment from a strict high-school learning environment to a freer one in college is also an experience that forces many students to equip themselves with new skills. Since there is a big gap between studying in high-school and college, many students report that they find themselves unfamiliar with the way classes are conducted and the assignments in college. Very often, students mark their first year at college as a difficult time when they are not familiar with taking lecture notes, writing research papers, communicating with classmates from many different backgrounds.

Several interviewees remember their college time as a time for enhancing lecture note taking skill, or reading skill, for these skills are the most fundamental ones that a student will have to learn sooner or later to cope with demands in college. I found a more proactive attitude in another group of students who are from a university where skill classes are offered and other non-skill courses encourage students to involve in group work, presentation giving assignments, in-class discussions. For example, classes that require students working in groups enhance their communication, and the ability to defend their opinions and help them to change the old habit of agreeing with whatever others say. Classes that make students produce presentations help students overcome stage fright, and learn to express their ideas better. The improvement of skills is observed among

students who are imposed to several opportunities to practice the skills in non-life skill classes.

Last but not least, each student's attributes and personality also have implications on how effectively teaching of life skills can work on him. The extent to which a person can adopt new skills depends very much on that person's own will. If the person is willing to change himself, open himself to new knowledge and is enthusiastic about developing his capability, serious with his own life, he is most likely to learn a great deal from life skill classes. Life skill classes are only an exterior motivation and this motivation is short lived, whereas interior motivation such as the desire to develop oneself to the fullest will be the long-lasting force to keep a student focus on training himself with the new skills.

## **6. Conclusion**

The necessity of teaching life skills is recognized only very recently in Vietnam. Together with this recognition, classes on these skills are offered in universities, vocational schools, and more frequently, in the form of short-term classes in training centers at considerably high prices. The society is hoping to improve the quality of its citizens, and universities re expecting to train more active learners. Self-help books are published in massive amount and immediately capture the attention of young readers and of their teachers, and parents. However, the lack of cooperation between all these factors lead to a picture of a construction site in which the main theme is to build up life skills, yet in separate corner of this construction site is a trainer working on his own, and unaware of what the others are doing.

Life skills, therefore, should be taught in conjunction with other subjects, rather than as a separate disconnected subject as the way it is taught now. Given the fact that skills can be acquired through practices and experiences, sufficient amount of time should be invested into these classes. However , life skills are taught in universities in these recent years just as any other courses, under high time pressure and there is no training given to teachers. These shortages leave teachers with a lot of difficulties in how to plan a lesson to bring the highest result. So besides classes dedicated only to teach life skills, life skill teaching should also be incorporated in other subjects where teachers should give students opportunities to practice critical thinking, communication, group work, time management, etc. Therefore, the interconnection between subjects taught in a

school is of very high importance because it can give the teachers a helicopter vision of what are required in other subjects and how they can cooperate with each other in term of teaching methodology to boost students' skills to the fullest.