

Putting LELLE into Practice

Elements of successful practice: from the university to the business world

Summary: LELLE – Let's Learn to Learn is an Erasmus funded project looking at what students need to learn in the university to be most successful when they start work. The three pillars of critical thinking, problem solving, and managing one's own learning were found to be the key skills needed. These skills require soft skills that are not necessarily taught in the university and so must be acquired or acknowledged by the students and professors as having relevance and as skills that will improve the marketability of the student graduating from the university. While not all these skills are taught now, the LELLE program has been working on a program that includes teaching the teachers and the students "how to learn" and offering support throughout the study period. When students learn these tools, they will not only have an advantage in the university, but also a head start in the business world, and so demonstrate very concretely the marketability of the student from the attending university.

LELLE – Let's Learn to Learn is an Erasmus funded project which has looked at the requirements necessary for students to be successful in schools, universities and then in the business world. The recommendations from the investigation were found through asking various higher educational institutions, as well as other associations and businesses, what skills they thought students should have to be able to complete their studies and start work with abilities that would help them in their professional lives, and then implementing the ideas.

Three areas of skill sets were found to lead to the competencies necessary. They are included in the ability to actually learn to learn by being able to organize both time and information. The skills suggest that being able to cooperate with others and share knowledge as well as find knowledge on an individual basis are valuable skills. Self-motivation is incredibly important.

The first area of ability sets deals with being able to think critically. Under this segment of consideration the focus was not only on the ways a person makes good evaluations of ideas, but also on how decisions are reached through finding connections and opportunities to fit the task at hand. The person's ability to reflect on the past in terms of what was successful and the ability to handle tasks pro-actively were a part of these findings.

The second area of skills involves the complex understanding of problem solving. Here again, both individual and cooperative problem solving require soft skills involved in good communication and empathy to solve problems and understand others' viewpoints. Creative thinking and analysis can lead to more effective productivity.

The third area deals with the overall management of the learning process. Managing the learning process requires the person to be able to access and process new knowledge as well as work with others to do so. In addition, people need to know what their goals are in order to find the right methods to go about what they need to do in order to obtain those goals as well as evaluate whether the methods chosen were the correct ones needed for the task.

Learning to learn

The research found that this was a key competency since in today's world knowledge in specific fields increases almost daily. Therefore employees (as well as students) need to be able to be able to recognize the need for more learning and then have the ability to assimilate the information they can find in order to continually improve themselves. The tools mentioned in order to develop these abilities ranged from trainings to self-

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improvement and self-education – so both individual as well as group work for improvement.

In my work as a consultant for the UN, I offered a number of courses on Improving Emotional Intelligence, Time and Stress Management. My courses were very well received by most participants and their own feelings about improving themselves in these areas could be seen through their motivation and commitment to what knowledge they received during these trainings.

However, I also had some participants who continually questioned the validity of the data with which they were presented. It turned out that these particular participants had been asked by their supervisors to attend the course. They had no motivation at all to improve themselves in the areas covered by the workshops and obviously felt that they knew all they had to know about the subjects or that the subjects were not important to their workplace.

This is often a problem with businesses when they are contemplating what types of trainings to offer their employees. And, much as with universities, the soft skills which involve dealing with the human factors of the work world or educational fields are ignored. I assume that this is because of the difficulty in having statistical evidence of improvement in these factors and the fact that if there is evidence it is usually subjectively based qualitative research. As more quantitative research and effective measurement tools can offer proof that training soft skills can be effective, there may be more call for such trainings to take place.

Of course one of the most important factors may well be the organization's own culture and the leadership and requirements of human resources to carry through on that culture. Zappos CEO, T. Hsieh, who was interested in having a happy place to work, realized that in order for this to happen it also had to be established in the hiring process as well, so HR needed to look for a certain type of person to start with (Hsieh, T. 2010).

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Corporate culture also leads to another possibility to improve student/employee skills in any area. Role modeling is an effective way to present new approaches to others. If the university professors as well as top managers show their own willingness and excitement in new learning, this can very well inspire those who come in contact with them to also acquire these attitudes. Research has shown that positive behavior is “contagious” and helps encourage productivity and creativity (Seligman 2002).

Another possibility for encouraging learning can be by offering extrinsic motivation when the intrinsic motivation needs a kick-start. This can be through checking through de-motivators that might be present: from favoritism to victimization, to benefit inequalities, to work environment factors. Extrinsic motivation can also be encouraged through a support networks that are established by the university or company, such as a mentoring program or other groups which might be available both in the university (study groups or sports/hobby groups) or in businesses (hobby groups or workshop groups). Such a group could also form from the content of a workshop. For example, at the UN, after my seminar on Emotional Intelligence, Time and Stress Management, a group was formed to meet every Friday to discuss how the staff had used and practiced what they had learned. This group met for over a year.

Learning to learn in today’s world where actually acquiring knowledge is not as necessary as knowing how and when to access knowledge means the universities should be changing the focus of some of their programs. But it also means that a clearer focus should be given to: critical thinking, problem solving and managing the learning process.

Critical thinking

Because of the wide variety and quality of knowledge offered today via the internet and other sources, critical thinking is not only desired but a necessity. With the advent of bots which can influence social media sites to guide people’s choices in elections to the fake news or facts that have become more ubiquitous because of the plethora of internet sites which

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do not have the strict guidelines of investigative journalism, critical thinking on the part of the reader, or user of these tools, is vital.

Critical thinking is also an area in which the university system excels. Through the writing of papers that are given feedback by experts, students discover what an acceptable source for information is; they discover – again through feedback – how to use the knowledge they gain to offer new views about problems they have discovered by themselves. Of course, here the correct type of feedback is of enormous importance. Again, the role model of the caring professor will help students to learn these skills.

In my position at a vocational college teaching academic writing, I have discovered how the school system in Austria does not prepare students for any of these vital abilities. Very often students learn much by rote and by the time they reach my one semester course in writing a B.A. thesis, they do not have the background needed to think for themselves or analyze which sources are of high quality.

In addition to teaching the basics of writing such a thesis, it becomes my job to also explain what has been missing in their education. This is a lot for students to comprehend and then implement in the course of only a few months. It would be much better if a system was already in place from high school onwards so that when the student arrived at the university, the student's critical thinking abilities would already be in place. It is necessary to practice critical analysis in an ongoing manner and therefore a number of research papers would need to be assigned so that, through good feedback, the student understands better what is required. Students can also provide peer review, helping each other to discover what works well, but this must be taught beforehand too. It is hoped that eventually self-assessment of one's own work would give the individual a true, reliable picture of the quality of the work produced. Through this process the student can then develop a critical thinking approach that can be useful throughout his/her life.

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In my classroom, students have a hard time understanding the concept of doing research to come up with a new idea. They have an idea and feel that if research shows that someone else also had that same idea then everything is lost. Rather than redefine what their idea is, they often give up hope about being able to complete a paper. Just helping students to understand how ideas are formulated and how they can be refined offers a concept that they can use later in life as well.

Another problem they have is with finding and using sources. It seems to be a great problem in today's world for young people to see the necessity of recording a source for what they are including in their papers. In Austria, plagiarism, while occurring all the time, is an unfamiliar concept. Too often students say that in the internet the information they find is also not sourced. In fact, Wikipedia is commonly mentioned as being a joint effort by a number of people who are not named. That Wikipedia itself is not considered a reliable source for just this reason is hard for them to understand. And, of course, in some respects, they are correct, as often in the business world as well, a team will come up with a new idea with no one person seen as its "author" or receiving credit.

However, I believe that universities have the courses that prepare students for analysis, research and the elements of critical thought that are necessary when it comes to reading and writing. Students are still learning about how far they can go in terms of listening to experts and questioning them as well as communicating their own ideas in speech. While work is being done in communications classes regarding presentation techniques and negotiation and meeting skills, it would certainly be of benefit for peers to challenge some of the ideas which are presented and ask for source information.

While critical thinking is a necessity today, being overly critical has disadvantages as well. Questioning everything, including colleagues' and managers' and professors' ideas or decisions may mean less effectivity in the workplace and less communicative balance. Like most activities in life, balance is also a key word here.

Problem solving

While this point was seen as important or very important to the people who filled out the survey, it seems to me that a solution focus orientation towards problem solving is a more effective strategy than those proposed (McKegow, M. & Jackson, P.Z. 2011). Perhaps this is reflected in the fact that people who answered the survey said that it was the attitude towards the problems which is the most important competence to develop. Also the reference to “best practice” refers certainly to changing the focus to solutions rather than seeking out problems. Below is a box showing the two approaches side by side taken from McKegow and Jackson.

Problem Focus	Solution Focus
What's wrong	What's wanted
What needs fixing	What's working
Blame	Progress
Control	Influence
Causes in the past	“Counter” in the past
The expert knows best	Collaboration
Deficits and weaknesses	Resources and strengths
Complications	Simplicity
Definitions	Actions

This emphasis on solution focus means that it is often better to look at what has gone right in a company and see what elements occurred that made those events happen. What is it that works well in a situation is perhaps a better starting place than looking for problems and weaknesses. It is indeed rather a checking of best practices that make for fewer problems rather than putting out fires when they occur. How can they be prevented? It is also suggested here that good communication is important and that is true whether you are looking for a solution or at a problem. Solution focus also works well when the human element is an important part of the equation. That means communication is key.

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Universities very often teach courses in communication – very often they include the skills of presenting and negotiating, managing meetings and basic analysis of what communication is. What I find often missing here is the emphasis on inter-personal skills. In order to communicate effectively, one needs to know the references and culture of the person one is communicating with. Too often the soft skills that would include building empathy, self-awareness as well as awareness of the other's truths, or different contexts: in general, the human elements of communication, are missing in these courses. While the Harvard Negotiations Project (Fisher and Ury, 1991) says that establishing rapport is one of the first steps to building a good negotiation structure, too often this element is skipped over in the classroom. Building rapport has to do with empathy as well and can be as important as the other elements involved in negotiations. More practical case studies and role play within the classroom and then within training sessions in businesses can lead to a better understanding of these elements. Learning by doing retains a great value in the teaching process and should be a more informed part of university life. So indeed one of the recommendations I highly endorse would be the participation in trainings which involve role plays dealing with complicated situations that need for a solution to be found.

My own experience in teaching a Business Communication class at the University of Pannonia has shown me that students are often in a very competitive frame of mind, thinking that it is important to “win” a negotiation. Because of this they tend to jump into the “game” and want to get the best results for themselves. It does not seem to matter that in theory, the class has been told how important rapport and empathy and making sure there is a win-win outcome is: often the first thoughts of the students have to do with only one team winning. Again, once feedback has been given about the negotiation and the students become aware of what was missing in their meeting, the results can be called into question. Doing another negotiation where the students could then use this knowledge would be the perfect follow up exercise when time allows.

The ability to preserve, the work hard, and to have impulse control (Mischel, 2014) help students when they need to look for creative ways to approach a difficult situation. Understanding the concept of flow and how it affects a person's increased productivity may also provide ways to strategize methods of change (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Being proactive, to look for solutions before a problem becomes a "fire" is also helpful (Covey, 1989).

Managing one's own learning process

The title of this segment indicates the basic difficulty in determining effective methods to practice it. There is a very subjective basis in discovering how one learns best. Depending on one's personality it could be that individual learning is a must. Extroverts are likely to say they learn best in study groups. There are people who exhibit a lot of discipline in their daily lives, and they just apply that discipline to their work at schools and businesses. Others find discipline difficult and need to find creative ways to be sure they complete the tasks they are given. The VIA Strengths test (Seligman, 2004) lets students know what their strengths are. These 24 strengths are divided into six classifications: Wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. A few of the strengths from each category include: creativity, love of learning, perseverance, zest, social intelligence, teamwork, leadership, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty, humor...A student who knows his/her strengths can then use them to find the right motivation to complete the learning necessary. School counselors or therapists often use these strengths to help students/people find ways to tackle difficult tasks.

It could be that a person learns better in the morning or the evening. Finding out more about yourself and your motivations is an imperative step in helping to manage the learning process. A growth mind-set, that is, the belief that effort can affect the ability to do the task is also essential. A fixed mind set indicates that someone feels that natural talent is all that is necessary for someone to be a success and tends to result in less effort being made to achieve a goal. With a growth mind-set, (Dweck, 2007) an individual believes that with hard work tasks can be accomplished.

Also a positive attitude can lead to many useful increases in productivity, creativity and health outcomes. New research being done in this field offers tested results for interventions that lead to an increase in well-being. (Seligman, 2011) Frederickson believes in the broaden-and- build upward spiral that comes from a positive attitude that, in turn, leads to a greater ability to work well with one another (2009).

All of these abilities and attitudes are necessary for working effectively both at the university and in the working world. They are also a big help in dealing with one's private life and the various efforts needed in connection with family, hobbies sports and community work.

General recommendations

Various recommendations were made by those taking the survey that can be implemented during students' time at the university. Many, however, rely on the professors accepting the premise that learning by doing can often be more effective than learning by telling. It would therefore be imperative to teach teachers to teach in a more interactive way. It would also be necessary for professors to be aware of how they can affect students through providing a tolerant learning environment and allowing for mistakes rather than being overly critical. Good feedback is also key to improving self-esteem of students and to encourage the right motivation to get the job done. This can take place through peer-to-peer feedback as well as through that given by the instructor. Team activities and role play can help students have a "hands on" experience of turning theoretical knowledge into practical applications.

While professors should be involved in their own professional development to improve these areas of their teaching, students can also be held responsible for coming up with their own motivational instruments if they are more self-aware. Mentoring and coaching on an individual basis may be the only way to integrate this type of learning at the university – or business – levels.

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The soft skills involved in both intra-personal and inter-personal behaviors as well as motivation and persistence, understanding the concepts of flow or elements of positive psychology would need to be taught to students who are unaware of these systems so they can indeed take more control over the learning process. This would lead them to a lifetime of strategies that would help them be successful in business as well as in their private lives. It would also mean that the graduating students would more easily find work and be more effective in the workplace. This, in turn, would encourage the business world to hire more students from a university that produces people with these capabilities. It is therefore advantageous for the university to be more involved in developing the skills that the business world needs. Although the universities have been places where theory is king for many years, universities of applied sciences have a foothold in the top educational area because they are also providing students with some key skills required by businesses. It is perhaps time for the universities as well to provide these life skills for their students. Let's help them learn how to learn.

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