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Soft Skills Don't Have to Be Hard: Embedding Soft Skills Instruction in Moroccan Secondary Schools

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Abstract

In an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, the need for the development and mastery of soft skills has perhaps never been greater. Schools can play a key role in soft skills education, but implementation in the classroom has faced a range of challenges that have impeded instruction. One solution is embedding soft skills within an extant academic curriculum, with the advantages that the academic infrastructure is already in place, and few additional materials or time are needed. This field study found that embedding soft skills had excellent outcomes, even with limited resources, materials, and training, a notable first step in the long road toward urgently needed, facilitated, and measurable soft skills instruction in the secondary school learning environment.

Introduction

A Moroccan professor (details changed for confidentiality) learned from a friend that a position was available in a prestigious company with high earning potential. She was certain one of her former students, a bright young woman, would be perfect for the job. The student worked as a low-paid telemarketer in a tight job market with high unemployment. The professor referred the student to the friend, who set up the job interview with the company. On the day of the interview, however, the student got her period and simply did not show up to the interview. Later on, the employers let her know their irritation at her no-show, but the **student's** perception was that, as she told the professor, the employers were "so mean to **her.**" The professor, in turn, was both exasperated and mystified. The young **woman's** decision not only tossed away an excellent job opportunity, and perhaps others, but it also damaged the **professor's** reputation, as the referee. The

professor **couldn't** understand why the young woman **hadn't** simply taken a pain medication instead and gone to the interview, or at least called the company to reschedule. The young woman, in her turn, would not accept that **she'd** ruined any opportunity and never apologized for her implied insult to the professor.

The professor told me this story to illustrate her conclusion that "students **today**" were "lazy," "ungrateful," and above all, "disrespectful." (This conclusion was echoed verbally by many professors at a Moroccan education research conference I attended in Rabat in 2022, with several other similar examples of this sort of student failure to take advantage of a potentially valuable employment or job skills opportunity). In this case, the professor said, the young woman would be in that low-paid telemarketing job for life. "**Well,**" the professor concluded. "**It's** her **choice.**"

But what if such students are not lazy or disrespectful, and what if employment/post-secondary failure is not their "**choice**"?

Educated professionals fluent in soft skills are often not aware that they are skills and assume **they're** simply ubiquitous, like simple manners. I once assumed someone was rude when they **wouldn't** look me in the eye; only later I found out they were blind. I went by my own biased, sighted experience. People can make erroneous conclusions based on their own experiences, and, for the educated and professional social classes, global soft skills are embedded in their own experiences and expectations. The problem is that **they're** not universally embedded in the experiences and expectations of many cultures and social classes. However, in an increasingly global economy in which people themselves wish to participate, it is, I believe, a matter of equity to teach the soft skills that are increasingly necessary to be a successful global citizen.

For this study, I define soft skills as the non-academic, non-technical, but essential skills that enable people to effectively participate in a more global community and economy. I add "**global**" to soft skills to underscore the increasing need to learn these skills in our changing, interconnected, 21st-century world.

Another way to define soft skills is to articulate what they are not. Soft skills are not synonymous with "life **skills**" nor what is commonly called "street **smarts,**" nor are they synonymous with emotional intelligence (EQ) or socio-emotional learning (SEL). SEL is the "process through which ... people ... acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring **decisions**" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; CASEL, 2022). Though SEL is not equivalent to soft skills, SEL does provide a necessary baseline from which students can develop soft skills. Or as the National Soft Skills Association states (2019): "There are hidden skills or competencies that are needed as the foundation blocks upon which soft skills can be taught. These necessary building blocks are known as emotional intelligence or EQ ... . Without these foundation blocks, a **learner's** ability to understand and to use soft skills is very **limited.**" In other words, SEL and EQ are necessary foundations for learning and acquiring soft skills, but they are not equivalent to soft skills.

For the purposes of this field study, I included six measurable soft skills that could easily be incorporated into an academic lesson with no technology, minimal training and support, and a wide range of conditions, abilities, and experience. Research identifies these as the most important soft skills for the developing student: communication skills, creativity, interpersonal skills, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving (Morozova et al., 2022).

Returning to the story of the young woman who failed to show up at a critical job interview, I find it noteworthy that all the implicit skills needed to solve the problem were specific soft skills: problem-solving; communication (written and oral); interpersonal skills (acknowledging the professional and personal needs of her interviewers while advocating professionally for her own needs), and, finally, adaptability (a completely unfamiliar situation presented itself to her; she needed to recognize the need to adapt to it as opposed to

treating it like, for example, an ordinary day at school). Thus, considering the manifold soft skills required for the student to even show up for the interview, we can ask if it is really the **student's** choice, as the professor asserted—or was the student simply unaware of her soft skills options and the consequences of her **"choice"?** What if this student had simply not learned the necessary soft skills and was unaware she needed to learn them?

As research has shown, soft skills are not ubiquitous, nor are they innate: they must be taught (Kechagias, 2011). Or, as The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) observes (2019): "We characterized [soft skills] as **"skills"** in order to emphasize the fact that they can be learned/developed by suitable training efforts, and they can also be combined, towards the achievement of complex **outcomes."** Although research has often focused on learning soft skills while at work, we increasingly recognize that these skills should be taught much earlier, in secondary schools, to best educate the whole student and prepare them for college and university, where soft skills are necessary as well. As the National Soft Skills organization suggests:

> For over one hundred years the focus of our career training programs in this country has been on technical skills or hard skills, while ignoring the teaching of soft skills. The reason the focus is on hard skills training is based on the incorrect assumption that hard skills are knowledge-based and therefore can be assessed and taught, while soft skills are not knowledge-based and cannot be assessed and taught ... . Research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center, has all concluded that job success comes from having well-developed soft skills ... . Almost 100 years have passed since Charles Rigborg Mann published his extensive research on the need for soft skills education in our schools and workplaces, yet little has changed. This is why the Soft Skills Association has been created (National Soft Skills Association, 2015–2019, p. 1).

Alternatively, as Rotherham and Willingham (2009) suggest, soft skills training should not be a matter of chance; it should be a deliberate school system design.

In short, the question is not if soft skills should be taught to students, but how.

It may appear to educated professionals and similar social classes that soft skills can be learned **"simply"** through family modeling and direct guidance, through tutoring or camps or guided internships. Indeed, educated parents are often heavily involved in guiding their young adult children as they navigate a new job or work in their first internship. But the fact is that marginalized children and young adults **don't** have this privilege:

> Marginalized youth—including immigrants, youth with low socio-economic status, aboriginal youth, and youth with disabilities—have higher rates of unemployment than others, and some argue this is partly because of the their [*sic*] lack of "soft **skills"** and social capital such as professional contacts ... . Marginalized youth, including youth with lower socio-economic status and diverse youth, may not have access to the same educational and cultural opportunities to develop soft skills ... . Because of the way in which soft skills are learned, many segments of the population are disadvantaged in access to the coaching, training and role models needed to develop these skills and cultural biases may play a role in the definition and assessment of soft skills. (Cukier et al., 2015, p. 14)

Clearly, the assumption that soft skills are innate or easily **"picked up"** at home is one we cannot afford to make as our cultures become increasingly diverse and globally interconnected and our jobs require more, not fewer, soft skills, lest we risk marginalized peoples becoming even more marginalized.

To return to the young Moroccan woman as an example, the likeliest explanation is that it wasn't that she **didn't** want the job or that she was **"lazy"** (when **she'd** never been lazy in college). She probably desperately

wanted the job. It was that, in all probability, she lacked the soft skills necessary to even land an interview, and, unlike more privileged people, she did not have educated professional parents or mentors to advise her and help her solve the problem—in this case, helping her both recognize and assess the problem and find the solution when she got her period and felt she **couldn't** attend the interview. Not having these soft skills she may have impacted her entire life; her job choices are limited, and, even though she is bright and capable, she risks becoming an underutilized resource from the **community's** perspective and a frustrated, underpaid telemarketer from her own perspective.

The discussion above suggests that we must determine how we can effectively teach soft skills in the K–12 classroom.

Soft Skills Implementation in The Classroom: Challenges

Though there is a widespread recognition of the importance of global soft skills and the need to implement soft skills instruction in the K–12 classroom (National Soft Skills Association, 2017, 2019; Touloumakos, 2020; HUFI, 2021; Gratton, 2018; Schulz 2008; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Rockwood, 2020), there is "still little scholarship on how to teach [soft skills] in **school**" (Rogers, 2020, p. 2). Added to this lack of scholarship, additional obstacles make implementation daunting or seemingly impossible among educational practitioners (National et al. Association, 2019). In *The Economic Times,* Simon (2015) asserts that soft skills "are extremely difficult to acquire and **develop**" (para. 3) and are often the hardest skills to teach.

A lack of professional development and training for educators is often cited as a significant obstacle to teaching soft skills, with the solution being more professional development and teacher training (Ngang et al., 2014; Bhatt, 2020). Such teacher training has been called for around the globe (Somprach et al., 2013).

Professional development and training are, without a doubt, positive. However, additional on-the-ground obstacles to implementing teaching soft skills exist no matter how trained the educator is. Teaching soft skills requires more hands-on and interactive learning, which is very difficult when the ratio of students to teachers is high. In Morocco, some high school classes are very large by American standards; for instance, one high school **"honors"** class I observed had 48 students. In first-year English language college classes I observed, class sizes designed to be seminar-style were well above 100. In the United States, secondary school class size can also be an obstacle; for example, **Utah's** average class size is 26.6.

Another large obstacle in nearly all Moroccan classes and many marginalized American classes is a lack of working hardware, software, and/or Wi-Fi. Using technology itself is not a soft skill, but two aspects make technology critical in soft skills: the first is that technology itself is an effective means of learning soft skills, particularly in large classes with limited resources. Indeed, a Moroccan teacher in Tanger (personal communication, June 2022) told me she had participated in an online American soft skills professional development for teachers, and all the solutions involved technology. She said wistfully, **"They looked like good programs."** There are indeed many online programs and classes on soft skills acquisition through Google, Udemy, Coursera, and others, for both educators and students. If a person lacks access to Wi-Fi, hardware, or software, however, these programs and classes are inaccessible.

But an even more pertinent aspect of technology-mediated soft skill development is that, although technology is increasingly a necessary hard skill in many global jobs and in navigating communities, soft skills are needed to most effectively apply this technology (Strauss, 2017). Indeed, as Strauss notes, Google's "Project Oxygen" **"shocked** everyone by concluding that, among the eight most important qualities of **Google's** top employees, STEM expertise comes in dead last. The seven top characteristics of success at Google are all soft **skills"** (para. 1–2).

To use an easy example, one way the soft skill of communication is incorporated into technology is through professional emails, whether to a professor, an internship supervisor, a job prospect, or colleague. Generally accepted soft skill protocols for email communication are often not specifically taught. As with many soft skills, these are assumed to be "something you can just pick **up.**" But without an understanding or knowledge of these soft skills, a student or employee may not only fail to communicate critical email content appropriately but also may unintentionally make themselves seem incompetent, foolish, or imprudent, to the point that they lose a job, a contact, an obliging professor, or a customer. Email communication protocols may seem obvious to educated professionals and those in similar social classes, but how can one learn soft skills in email communication without having access to writing them? Without this access, a person has no modeling, feedback or the practical application necessary for learning. Students privileged with regular access to email may use it commonly to communicate with teachers or peers in online classes. Embedded online communication teaches soft skills via modeling and real-world application. And yet the student without the technology to learn such skills faces a significant detriment as they enter college or a career. Verbally, several Moroccan university professors expressed exasperation to me at their **students'** poor email communication (March–April 2022), saying it was common for students to submit an important paper via WhatsApp with a blurry scan of a handwritten paper, and no attempts to email the professor with an explanation. It was striking to me how, once again, educated professionals did not see email communication as a soft skill that needed to be taught but had not been. Their complaints were not unique: "For decades employers as well as educators [have] frequently complain[ed] about a lack in soft skills among graduates from tertiary education institutions. Predominantly missed are communication skills ..." (Schulz, 2008, p. 146).

On top of the challenges of "**just**" technology access, however, are many additional on-the-ground obstacles in need of further study. These include:

- A lack of a defined and measurable set of soft skills, so that an objective cannot be gauged or measured;

- Standardized high-stakes state tests (both in Morocco and the United States) do not include significant soft skills assessment but instead focus on knowledge-based skills and application of these skills;

- Curriculum that often excludes soft skills instruction, incorporation, or implementation;

- Student assessments that likewise exclude soft skills so no student data exists on soft skills baselines or gains;

- A lack of autonomy as applied to the lesson within the classroom, so that the teacher is not free to adapt and incorporate soft skills into the hard skills instruction based on student-centered classroom data;

- A lack of administrative support so that soft skills are not observed, facilitated, or rewarded in teacher assessments nor in collaborative opportunities;

- Lack of data on the method of instruction and implementation: whether soft skills are most effectively learned embedded in extant lessons; or taught separately in a "Soft Skills **Class;**" or mentored by soft skills coaches/tutors; or modeled through virtual scenarios;

- Classrooms that are not physically set up for soft skills, e.g., bolted desks and chairs that cannot be moved into small, changeable cooperative groupings;

- A lack of shared trust within the classroom. Most soft skills, when practiced and applied, require students to take social risks, and therefore students must be supported and must trust each other and the teacher, or they will not take such risks. All it takes is for one student to be ridiculed for sharing a creative idea or speaking in front of the class, and the entire class starts to refuse to take such risks; and, finally,

- A lack of baseline SEL development and other related socio-emotional skills, which are a necessary precursor for a great deal of soft skills. One cannot, for instance, apply empathy across cultures if one lacks empathy. Indeed, most soft skills require empathy as a baseline—just to use one example—including effective teamwork, communication, and leadership.

All of these obstacles, and more, lead to the paradox of soft skills being urgently called for in K–12 instruction over decades and equally not included in said curriculum or instruction.

Nevertheless, despite these obstacles, I wanted to find out how soft skills could be implemented immediately: whether and how they can be developed in real classrooms with limited resources that already exist, with teachers as they already are, and students at their current levels of soft skills development. As a working professional educator, my own sense was that, despite obstacles that might be less apparent outside the school system, teaching soft skills was achievable. Accepting all the obstacles above that currently exist, was it still possible to successfully integrate soft skills in an academic activity already incorporated into the curriculum, and if so, how effective was implementation?

Methods

Participants

I decided to embed the teaching of soft skills into existing courses as the method most easily applied with minimal tools or interventions. Research has indicated that embedding is "one of the most practical ways in instilling soft skills to teacher trainees, as minimal or almost no changes need to be made to the current course **structure**" (Tang et al., 2015, p. 130).

Since I would be embedding soft skills, I needed to design an academic activity with that in mind and plan for a larger sampling of classrooms and students. Through the generous assistance of Fulbright and MACECE (Moroccan American Commission for Cultural Exchange), I was able to secure Moroccan government approval to lead a 1- to 2-hour-long lesson in 16 different classes of high school students. Four additional classes were first-year university students at two universities in Rabat, because I wanted to gain perspective on the soft skills of 18-year-olds fresh from high school who had been selected for academic strengths. Of the 16 secondary schools, four were elite private schools in Rabat; the rest were public schools, including the universities. The high school classes were in four regional administrative units out of 12 in the country and ranged in size from seven to 48 students. University classes were all larger, with as many as 54 students present, though the class roster was often 100–150. (University classes generally suffer a very high level of absenteeism, as per verbal communication from all the professors with whom I interacted. There are always many reasons for chronic absenteeism, but it is often due at least in part to poorly applied soft skills—for instance, a lack of communication, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving—and thus could perhaps be partly ameliorated through soft skills instruction at an earlier age and soft skills support at the university. (This is another topic for additional research.)

In total, I observed 616 students in Morocco. Figure 1 categorizes the students by level of school, type, and approximate social class based on verbal communication from the administration and teachers. Because I studied a wide variety of students—attending public/private or secondary/university schools; geographically diverse; and from various social classes—the categories assist us in seeing any patterns in the type/region of schools or students in which soft skills are more effectively integrated.

In general, Moroccans send their children to private schools if they can afford it; the learning outcomes and conditions in public schools are indeed undeniably inferior (Toutate, 2021). Thus attendance at Moroccan public versus private schools is a reliable indicator of social class as well (Al Fanar Media, 2018). This is

important to contextualize because my field study purposely focused more on public schools and lower-income students, both because they form the majority of the population and because lower-income public schools defacto operate under less-than-ideal conditions (larger class sizes, higher absenteeism, lack of technology, less engagement in content that seems to have little to do with their lives, and so on). If soft skills can be effectively taught under greater challenges, surely they can also be taught in environments with fewer challenges, such as schools with a small student population, ample technology, and educated, involved parents with money and available time.

Figure 1. *Population Studied: Total of 616 Moroccan Students*
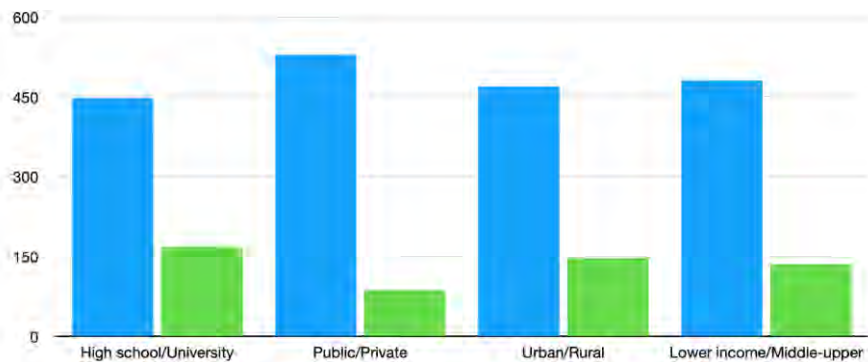
Since I lack fluency in Darija (Moroccan Arabic), Arabic, Amazigh, or French, the languages most commonly spoken in Morocco, I considered hiring a translator and attending an Arabic or French class, but fortunately, the Moroccan curriculum includes learning English as a second language. By concentrating on such classes, I could both keep the subject consistent from class to class and conduct the lessons in my own native English with the teacher assisting with translating as necessary. Moroccan English-as-a-foreign-language classes are a type of hybrid of American-style foreign language classes combined with high school English: besides grammar, the classes work on writing, reading fiction and nonfiction, grammar, speaking, and listening. In general, based on my observations during my visits, the **students'** English was at least sufficient, and often surprisingly fluent; perhaps because many young Moroccans of this generation are eager to learn a working fluency of English through social media, videos, movies, and online games (as per verbal communication from both students and teachers). In all classes, I gave students the option to write their activity in Arabic or French (and I would get it translated), since these were languages they might be more familiar with. But nearly all students opted to write in English. Again, I wanted to accept obstacles—schools as they currently were "on the ground"—and see what could be accomplished despite these obstacles. In this case, if students could be successful in a language not their own, how much more successful could they be in a language in which they were fluent?

In no classroom did the students have Wi-Fi or computer access. Such conditions are common in Morocco, where Wi-Fi and hardware glitches and even access are part of everyday obstacles in many classrooms. Although most had phone access, they were normally not permitted to use their phones in class. For these reasons, I designed the lesson to be technology free.

Data Collection

I designed an activity that could be applied to any academic level of student of nearly any age across cultures: collaborative storytelling with a given prompt. I am not aware of any soft skills research using collaborative storytelling to embed soft skills instruction, but I chose storytelling because of its high implicit interest among

a range of students (Miller et al., 2008), its flexibility in academic and language level (it can be a simple story or a complex one, regardless of age or ability), and its alignment to all the soft skills I wanted to study: communication skills, creativity, interpersonal skills, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving.

The prompt I created was:

> *The evening I learned my beloved grandmother had died, I took a long walk by the sea, alone with my thoughts. Suddenly, I saw ...*

I created this prompt because it was broadly applicable for Moroccan students: Morocco borders two oceans, so nearly all students are familiar with the ocean; most students have grandparents and can imagine their death (or have experienced it already); and the prompt can branch out in any genre (and did): realism, fantasy, science fiction, horror, moral fable, spy thriller, religious/symbolic, humor, mystery.

Thus, the objective of the lesson was: given a prompt, students will collaboratively create and write a story in any genre in 25–30 minutes, and then orally present their story to the entire class while classmates actively listen.

The academic objective thus already fulfills academic skills: a range of writing, speaking, and listening. In the U.S., these Common Core Content standards are as follows:

CCS.ELA LITERACY.CCRAW.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

CCS.ELA LITERACY.CCRAW.10: Write routinely over ... shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

CCS.ELA LITERACY.CCRA.SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCS.ELA LITERACY.CCRA.SL6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks ... .

CCS.ELA LITERACY.W11-12.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCS.ELA LITERACY.W.11-12.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

I could embed soft skills instruction into this academic skills lesson simply by deepening the lesson. For American schools, the academic objectives could be as listed above. For Moroccan schools, in which the classes were additionally English-language-learner (ELL), the academic goals could be organized around a curriculum centered on targeted vocabulary and punctuation in addition to story-writing. (Examples of an ELL focus would be, "use dialogue with correct punctuation and **vocabulary**" or "use the past perfect verb tense at least five times.") Collaborative storytelling could likewise be used to help teach soft skills under the academic umbrella of any subject—for example, retelling a historical tale; imagining a scientific or mathematical alternate history; or telling a story in a foreign language. The genre could be specified as desired; for instance, if a class is studying ancient Ethiopia, the stories can be historical fiction set in that era. Or the genre can be science fiction around a scientific concept learned.

No matter the size or academic level of the class, students were instructed to form their own groups of about four. This was the first soft skills assessment: without teacher help, students had to negotiate forming the

groups themselves in a classroom in which group activity is not the norm (based on verbal communication with teachers and on Moroccan curriculum), and which implicitly involves the soft skills of communication, interpersonal skills, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving.

Again, by making the activity self-formed, collaborative, creative, and social, I implicitly could observe the six soft skills I wanted to measure: communication skills, creativity, interpersonal skills, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving. How effectively did a range of students successfully incorporate the embedded soft skills during the course of the lesson?

Specifically, the soft skills were embedded in this manner:

For *communication skills,* students had to effectively communicate to form their small groups and then communicate with each other to write the story collaboratively; communicate with each other to decide who was writing down the story and who would be reading the story at the end; communicate to the teachers when needing assistance; read the story to the entire class; ask questions and write thoughts at closure.

Creativity was embedded implicitly through the activity by creating an original complete story in a consistent genre.

Interpersonal skills were embedded by students navigating with their teammates, whom they might not have been friends with but simply sat near each other, and negotiating which story idea to take and who took on roles such as stenographer, reader, and so on. Though students sometimes wanted me or their teacher to solve this problem for them, we encouraged them to solve this themselves.

Teamwork was embedded by having to produce a finished story in a consistent genre in 25–30 minutes. The four students had to work together in order for this to occur.

Adaptability was embedded by simply having a foreign teacher (me) arrive in their class and, in English, participate in a type of lesson plan **they'd** never had before (as per verbal communications with teachers and administration): collaborative storytelling with public speaking. Students accustomed to sitting in rows working on worksheets were now in groups of four having to write a story under time pressure in another language. This is effective adaptability.

Problem-solving was embedded throughout. Students had to problem-solve at each step. I deliberately refrained from telling the students what to do or giving them story ideas (several asked, and I simply encouraged them). I limited myself to circling the room to provide any one-on-one support needed and announced time remaining. The time and the collaborative nature of the stories required constant problem-solving: what method should they use to write their stories? How do they decide whose ideas they write down? How do they complete the story in only 25 minutes? The fact that they knew they would have to present the story immediately to their peers, as well as the teacher and guest, made the lesson plan implicitly motivating for the vast majority of students, which I easily observed as I circulated around the room and saw their verbal or written cooperation in creating the story together.

I, therefore, collected data by circulating around the room and observing the entire activity and then taking field notes; interviewing students, administration, and teachers; collecting the written stories themselves and analyzing them; and collecting an open-ended written questionnaire about the **students'** own experiences.

Materials used were simple: pen or pencils and a piece of paper; I used a single dry-erase marker to write the prompt on the whiteboard—or used chalk on a chalkboard—and reviewed the prompt orally with the class. Assessments were both informal and formal: field notes on my observations and interactions while I circulated as the students engaged in the activity; informal choral or thumbs up/down checks for understanding at periodic intervals; the formal assessment of the hard copies of the stories themselves and

the presentation in front of the class. Additional formal assessments were the open-ended questions assigned at the conclusion of the storytelling activity for closure to each student; these were either assigned for homework if there was not enough time in the classroom to include it or assigned and collected in the class.

When embedding soft skills, the instructor should include clearly stated, written, definable, and measurable standards and expectations, preferably converted to number scores for ease of understanding, just as one would do with academic instruction. I created the embedded soft skills assessment below, and it was displayed and reviewed with students prior to the lesson. If grading is not a goal, it is still important to have clearly stated consequences for success, however that is defined.

This soft skills assessment can be adjusted for many types of collaborative lessons and subjects, not just storytelling. For example, in a history class, students could work together to create a poster project to present an historical concept, event, or leader. The key to the assessment's application is the creative and collaborative incorporation of the soft skills within the academic structure of the lesson, usually using small group work with a written and verbal presentation component. That process implicitly involves both academic instruction and, though its collaborative nature, soft skills instruction.

Table 1. *Scoring Rubric For Lesson Activity: Soft skills*

Soft skill sategory:	Score:	4	3	2	1
Problem solving		Students successfully and independently solve all problems.	Most students solved most problems.	Needed some teacher help to solve.	Failure to solve many problems.
Creativity		Story was original, coherent, & internally consistent, yet also surprising/original. Incorporated several or one creatively, rich detail.	Largely original & internally consistent but predictable. One genre, some detail.	Mostly coherent, lacking detail, predictable.	Minimal effort, few details, not coherent.
Interpersonal skills		Able to effectively collaborate with little or no friction & positive verbal & non-verbal skills in order to produce a complete story in 25–30 minutes.	Most able to complete a story in 25–30 minutes with only a little friction.	Some able to complete a story in 25–30 min., with assistance, some disagreements.	Attempted, but few able to complete a story in 25–30 min. due to disagreements.
Teamwork		All members of the group work well together and cooperate to produce a coherent story, with no one person dominating.	Most members work together with few instances of one person dominating.	Some members did not participate or heads down/silent.	Group did not work together.

| Communication | Small groups formed smoothly & communicated effectively to write collaboratively; assign notetakers & effective speakers; ask thoughtful questions. | Groups formed with minimal help; some prompting needed; story successfully presented. | Groups formed but with significant help; ineffective communication; speaker needed prompting. | Group could not form or function through communication. Not able to adjust despite help. Off task behavior. |
| Adaptability | Students were able to ajdust to a foreign teacher with unfamiliar instructions while maintaining order & on-task behavior. | Largely able to adjust; some help needed. | Partially able to adjust; significant help needed, some off task. | Not able to adjust despite help. Off-task behavior. |

Note: Scores of 3 and 4 considered successful, 2 partially successful; 1 not successful

As students worked in their small groups, I circulated, both assisting with the activity as needed and taking field notes and scoring through observations of students' interactions, behaviors, their own self-assessment in the questionnaire; and through oral communication with teachers and administration. I never gave students **"answers,"** and asked the teachers I was working with to avoid doing so as well. In order for any lesson to be successful, it is important to gradually release autonomy to the students with guided practice. This holds for teaching soft skills, as well.

Indeed, as an aside, I would assert that one of the many reasons collaborative activities like group storytelling are so effective in teaching soft skills is that, by their very nature, complex interactions to produce a complex product among 3–5 students under time and peer pressure, compel students to use soft skills. To use the soft skill of problem-solving, for example, the students had to work together in each group in order to solve:

- Which student would be the "stenographer," recording the story as dictated by the others?

- Which student would read the story?

- How to solve the problem of individuals having different ideas for the direction of the story.

- The method they would use to write the story.
  Most students wrote in an oral collaboration, bouncing ideas off each other with the "hand **writer**" recording the agreed narrative, one sentence at a time. The problem, in that case, was how to incorporate all voices in the cases of one or two people inevitably dominating. I watched for solutions. One group creatively divided the story into paragraphs and assigned each person a paragraph, then put it all together into a story about five minutes before completion. Another group wrote a rough draft based on oral collaboration, then revised, also collaboratively. In this way, this activity also incorporated and tested the soft skills of creativity and teamwork.

After the students completed the writing activity, I called on each group to read their story to the class, and observed how they selected the reader, how effective the reader was, particularly in an unfamiliar format with a stranger in the room, and how the students listened to the speaker as they read. When the students were finished presenting their stories, I passed out the questionnaire asking for their anonymous individual impressions of the activity, which is reproduced in the **"Questionnaire"** section. Questions 1–3 were simply a way for me to gauge engagement and as a check for academic and soft skills understanding. Question 4 was designed to gauge their impressions of the soft skills of teamwork, communication, and interpersonal skills. I made it anonymous so that

the students would feel free to speak out if they wanted. If the class was an hour long, I assigned the questionnaires for homework to submit to the teacher, who would scan the questionnaire and email an attachment. If the class was longer, I had the students complete the questionnaire as part of the classroom activity.

Findings

Table 2. *School Rubric Soft Skill Scores*

	Problem Solving	Creativity	Interpersonal Skills	Teamwork	Communication	Adaptability	Total
Public University #1 RABAT B	2	2	1	2	2	2	11
Public University #2 RABAT B	2	2	1	3	2	2	12
Public University #3 RABAT B	2	2	1	3	2	3	13
Public University #4 RABAT B	2	2	2	4	3	2	15
Private Secondary #1 Rabat A	1	1	1	2	4	1	10
Private Secondary #2 Rabat A	2	2	2	3	4	1	14
Private Secondary #3 Rabat A	2	4	1	3	3	1	14
Private Secondary #4 Rabat A	2	4	2	3	4	2	17
Public Secondary #1 Chefchaouen B	4	3	4	4	4	4	23
Public Secondary #2 Chefchaouen B	4	3	4	4	4	4	23

	Problem Solving	Creativity	Interpersonal Skills	Teamwork	Communication	Adaptability	Total
Public Secondary #3 Chefchaouen B	4	3	4	4	4	4	23
Public Secondary #1 Tanger B	4	4	4	4	4	4	24
Public Secondary #2 Tanger A	4	3	4	4	4	4	23
Public Secondary #3 Tanger B	4	3	4	4	3	4	23
Public Secondary #4 Tanger B	4	3	4	4	4	4	23
Public Secondary #5 Tanger B	4	3	4	4	4	4	23
Public Secondary #6 Tanger B	4	3	4	4	4	4	24
Public Secondary #7 Tanger B	4	2	4	4	4	4	22
Public Secondary #1 Marrakech B	4	4	4	4	4	4	24
Public Secondary #2 Marrakech B	4	3	4	4	4	4	23

Key: A = upper/middle-upper social class; B = working/impoverished social class
Administrative Regions: Rabat, Tanger (including Chefchaouen), Marrakech. Urban: Rabat, Tanger

Questionnaire

Directions. Please answer the questions below to the best of your ability. **I'm** looking for honest reasons and support to back up your opinion. **"Because"** or **"I don't know"** is not a reason. :-)

1.   What was one thing you enjoyed about the storytelling activity? Explain why.

2. What was one thing you disliked about the storytelling activity? Explain why.

3. What was one thing **you'd** do differently next time? Explain.

4. In your opinion, did everyone in the group participate fairly equally? If not, why not? Explain.

Especially considering that this activity took place under challenging circumstances—conducted in a foreign language, headed by a foreigner they'd never met, without preparation or soft skills training of the students, no technology, no concrete grading or behavior rewards—the overall positive results are surprisingly strong. All groups submitted a completed fictional story that followed logically from the same first sentence; had an internally consistent genre, plot, and logic; and had an ending, and a title. Thus, this academic objective was met with 100% success, a very high rate. More research is warranted to determine if soft skills actually enhance the learning of an academic skill, thus benefiting academics at the same time academics provide a structure for learning and incorporating soft skills.

I counted the soft skills objective **"successful"** if a score of 3 or 4 was achieved. Somewhat successful is a score of 2. Unsuccessful is a score of 1. Thus, a total score of at least 18 would be a **"successful"** implementation of all soft skills combined (6 categories times 3 on bric score). A score of 12–17 would be "partly **successful**" (6 categories times 2 as a minimum). Any score totaling under 12 would be **"unsuccessful."**

Table 3. *Soft Skills Implementation Results*

	% Successful	% Somewhat Successful	% Unsucessful
By school %	60%	30%	10%
By student %	58.4%	36.5%	5.1%
By type of school: private	0%	75%	25%
By type of school: public	75%	18.8%	6.2%
By type of school: secondary	75%	18.8%	6.2%
By type of school: first-year university	0	75%	25%
By social class: upper/middle	20%	60%	20%
By social class: working	100%	0	0
By admin region: Tanger	100%	0	0
By admin region: Marrakech	100%	0	0
By admin region: Rabat	0	75%	25%
By soft skill: problem-solving	60%	35%	5%
By soft skills: creativity	65%	30%	5%
By soft skills: interpersonal skills	65%	15%	20%

	% Successful	% Somewhat Successful	% Unsuccessful
By soft skills: teamwork	90%	10%	0
By soft skills: communication	85%	15%	0
By soft skills: adaptability	65%	20%	15%

As is perhaps observable from Tables 1 and 3, university students were on the whole less successful than secondary school students in learning or applying embedded soft skills, a surprising result to me and one warranting further study. I would hypothesize that the lower score may be correlated with the larger class sizes and, perhaps more importantly, a lack of community and, hence, trust among the students. Moroccan secondary schools, both public and private, typically group students in the same classes year to year, so students in secondary schools tend to know each other from young childhood; whereas college students, particularly those in their first year, are strangers to each other. It is also possible that college students are typically rewarded more for the regurgitation of information and conformity than for creativity and other soft skills, so they were not motivated or did not know how to be successful in this activity. This was especially noticeable in the college **students'** notable lack of **"creativity"** in their stories. I define "creativity" as an imaginative narrative with an unexpected but cohesive and internally logical and inventive combination of genre, ideas, images, setting, character choices, and/or plot points. Under this definition, two of the private schools produced the most creative stories, as well as two of the publics (in Tanger and Marrakech), and the universities did the least well, as did two private school classes. Three out of four schools producing creative stories were composed of upper-class/middle-class students. Additional research is warranted. Regardless, as I observed earlier, a sense of trust and EQ/SEL is essential to the successful instruction of soft skills, and I would underscore the importance of baseline conditions under which soft skills must be embedded: the class must establish trust and EQ/SEL skills; and the students must be rewarded via a clear and transparent assessment for successful soft skills as well as academics; although, here too, further research is warranted. Otherwise, students will be reluctant to take any risk—a necessary aspect of learning, particularly in soft skills since they require a social, more public risk of exposure. Again, further research on the necessary classroom environment and culture for optimal soft skills instruction is warranted.

Most students actively participated in the activity the entire class period, with the exception of the public speaking aspect of communication. It was surprising to me that a significant portion of Moroccan students had trouble staying focused on the speaker and openly talked with each other while their classmate was reading their story or openly gave obvious body signals that they were not listening by being turned away and obviously writing notes to each other, with giggling. In verbal discussions with teachers, I was told that students are simply not accustomed to listening to those not in authority. Listening to fellow classmates was clearly an entirely new soft skill for many of the students. I, therefore, categorized attentive listening under **"adaptability"** for this research. Attentive listening is a soft skill on its own as well, but I did not include it here because I had limited research time and needed a broader soft skill under which the listening would fall. The Tanger administrative district (which includes Chefchaouen), already had public speaking training implemented in their curriculum, based on conversations with the teachers and administration. Thus, perhaps the public speaking aspect would have needed less **"adaptability"** in Tanger than in other classes wherein public speaking and listening were barely or never measured or taught, and this was why their results were superior to other regions. Further research into targeted public speaking training for soft skills is warranted, however.

Lower- and working-class students also performed better on average than upper-class students, which surprised me given the advantages upper-class students are generally privileged with, including smaller class

size, more educated parents, more comfortable classroom conditions, and more technology. It is unknown why, but perhaps, considering that the two lowest private school performers had the same teacher in the same private school, the lower performance here has to do with the particular culture of the classes or school. Additional research is needed to determine how teacher support, pedagogy, school climate, positive and negative consequences of learning soft skills, and all the other conditions and impediments each impact soft skills instruction.

In this field study, engagement was high: only one student refused to participate in his group (interestingly, this was in an elite private school, but the sample size is too small to draw any conclusions), and upwards of 90% of students in all classes were visibly enthusiastic about the activity. All teachers except one made variant comments of the students "**loving** the **activity,**" and one teacher in Tanger kept exclaiming that "these were her worst [academic] **students**" but that they were highly engaged in the activity. In all the classes, students personally came over to thank me for the lesson, saying it really impacted them and they had a lot of fun. In the questionnaire, 100% of students stated they enjoyed the activity, 82% said they could not think of anything they disliked, 16% said they only disliked the time limit, and 12% said **they'd** prefer to do the storytelling individually. About 87% reported that everyone participated equally in their groups.

The one exception was an elite private secondary school class, which performed poorly on nearly all levels. The teacher was visibly not engaged and even said that next time I should give a "more challenging activity to them because **they're** very **smart.**" This class produced the worst quality stories as well, was very distractible and, when the teacher left the room for at least 15 minutes to talk to a former student in the hallway, the girls kept talking about how "**hot**" he was, and many students passed notes and threw things across the room. It is unknown why this class in particular had such difficulty with the activity, but surely—since these were all students of wealthy families and ostensibly high academic achievers—part of the results must be due to the culture in the particular class. Since this was the only secondary class with a notable low score, there is not enough significant data currently to analyze causes. The second-to-lowest performing class was a university class with a professor who had spent the entire first hour sitting at her desk and reading from a study guide displayed on the screen, a not uncommon style of instruction in many Moroccan classes I visited, but the most visibly frontal, with the most visibly disengaged students (I sat in the back and observed the last five or six rows of students on their phones, sleeping, or doodling for the entire hour). Teacher engagement and attitudes seem to have a large impact on learning soft skills, but further research is necessary.

Overall, an important first study would be to research baseline classroom environment and culture best conducive to successfully embedded soft skills/hard skills activities. Also it would be beneficial to compare the same academic skills objective with and without soft skills incorporation, that is, storytelling being individually completed and submitted, versus it being collaborative and read in front of the class. Another area of study would be optimal academic instruction that best imbeds soft skill instruction. When it comes to learning soft skills, there are a great deal of answers still to be discovered.

Conclusion

Overall, soft skills were taught successfully or somewhat successfully to 90% of students across regions and types of schools despite a multitude of challenges and impediments within the classroom.

This field study focused on practical implementation given the current skill set of the teachers, the tools they already had, and the students' skill levels as they currently were. Accepting the obstacles that currently exist—not only in Morocco, but also in the United States, particularly with our rising immigrant community and other marginalized populations—was it possible to integrate soft skills under such circumstances in an academic activity already incorporated into the curriculum, and if so, was it also effective?

The study shows that it is indeed possible to integrate soft skills successfully into an academic lesson plan—specifically, collaborative storytelling—at a 90% success rate of soft skills instruction, and a 100% success rate of academic instruction. This study demonstrates that, despite existing obstacles, soft skills instruction can be successfully incorporated into the class without formal professional development or training or prior soft skills instruction, and with limited resources.

It was striking that social class and lack of resources and class size and lack of training are not apparent impediments to learning embedded soft skills. This is good news for applicability for embedded soft skills as conditions are now, since most classes are not privileged to have the ideal means for learning soft skills.

Given the urgent need to learn soft skills in an increasingly global community, and the high success rate of teaching soft skills even under challenging on-the-ground conditions, embedded soft skills instruction would be an effective best first step in incorporating learning soft skills in schools. Further study and implementation are urgently needed as I have outlined throughout this paper.

As immigrants and diverse populations wish to participate more and more in the global economy while, at the same time, having limited or no access to learning the soft skills associated with this economy and community, research on soft skills becomes even more critical. In other words, to neglect this soft skill is an equity issue and risks further marginalizing the marginalized. As Aomer Boum, anthropologist at UCLA and author of the seminal work *Political Coherence of Educational Incoherence* (2008) observes (personal communication, April 2022), the untaught **"language"** of soft skills likewise can have the unintended devastating effect of handing further privilege to an already-privileged subclass of people. Deliberate, clear, universal, measurable, early, defined, and consistent public school education of soft skills is the answer.

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