Leaders' Narratives on Enhancing Academic Results through Soft Skills

Netra Bahadur Subedi[1]

Abstract

Although the term "soft skill" is new in our context, it has got lots of momentum very recently. Many research works on soft skills have been made worldwide and one important finding says that soft skills are important employability skills (Vasanthakumari, 2019.) Unfortunately, no substantial study has been made on whether soft skills help retain hard skills or not. Therefore, I have attempted to research this less travelled area and the finding is that soft skills help retaining hard skills and strengthening academic results. In the course of my research, I applied narrative inquiry as a research methodology selecting three research participants purposively. After data presentation, as I analyzed the patterns and themes, I got the finding that soft skills are supportive to enhance hard skills.

Key Words: Soft Skills, Hard Skills, Personal attributes, aptitudes, EQ

Background

It is obvious that soft skills have been leading domain of study in the western societies. But it is a new area in our context. However, people are much concerned about soft skills today. Though it is a new term in the academia, business houses, and government offices, it has been a buzz word. Particularly, in the western society, it has been a matter of concern for many for the last few decades. In this connection, it is worthwhile to define this term. Rather than technical aptitude and knowledge soft skills are character traits, manners, and individual behaviours. By soft skills means they are the nontechnical, impalpable, individual's skills that show people's good qualities that are required for people of different walks of life(Robes ,2012).

It is a matter of fact that soft skills are all connected to people's character features, manners, and behaviours that contradict with technical and academic knowledge. However, whoever holds public positions like leaders, managers, and other agents are expected to have soft skills to a large extent because these qualities enhance their skills.

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1   Mr. Subedi is the lecturer of English at Koteshwor Multiple Campus, Koteshwor affiliated to T. U.

Needless to say, in modern academia and most of the recruiting companies the term soft skills is heavily used. Very recently, elsewhere also, we often hear people talking about it. At the same time, we hear about it in many government offices. It is understandable that both hard skills and soft skills have become occupational requirements of a job/self-employment and many other areas. In a sense, soft skills are associated to feelings, insights, and emotions very often known as inner knowing. Another definition states:

Soft skills is a sociological term relating to a person's "EQ(Emotional Intelligence Quotient)",the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language , personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that characterize relationships with other people. Soft skills complement hard skills (part of a person's IQ), which are the occupational requirements of a job and many other activities (Moin, 2012, p.212).

It is worthwhile to mention that soft skill is a sociological term that is associated to the Emotional Intelligence Quotient of an individual that comprises personality features, civic sense, communication skills, people's habits and behaviours, amicability, interactivity etc. Contrary to this, hard skills, another traditionally speaking more important occupational requirement of a job can be tested academically through summative tests. However, hard skills get well activated with the help of soft skills.

> Research suggests that soft skills are just as good an indicator of job performance as traditional job qualifications (hard skills). Hard skills are the technical abilities and knowledge that one possesses, whereas soft skills are those personal attributes and interpersonal qualities that are intangible. Although soft skills are important to recognize and improve, hard skills are critical on the job as well. While employers exceedingly want new employees to possess strong soft skills, the hard and soft skills must complement one another (Robes, 2012, p.462; Subedi, 2018, p134)

In the past the recruiting companies only focused on hard skills, traditionally speaking job qualification. Needless to say, they comprise technical abilities and contents or knowledge. Contrary to this, soft skills are personal attributes and personal impalpable qualities. In today's market both hard skills and soft skills are equally important. That is to say, soft skills complement the hard skills.

Soft skill that most experts recognize as a very important one is Emotional Intelligence. A possible definition of this transversal skill is the ability to perceive and express

emotions, to understand and positively use them, and to effectively manage emotions in ourselves and others. Thus Emotional Intelligence is central to performance. It can be considered connected to individual personality but it can also be developed through attention and development (Kingsley, 2015).

The matter of prime concern in the teaching-learning process, as mentioned earlier, is emotional intelligence. So, managing emotions is another specific area of soft skills. This intersectional skill has a concern with understanding, expressing, and managing emotions in oneself and in others positively. That is to say, emotional intelligence is the focal point of soft skills. It is directly connected to individual personality that grows in phases.

It has been an established fact that soft skills are essential skills for employment and career growth. Research indicates that there is one to one relationship between soft skills level and employability and career growth(Chavan, 2020). In other words, those people who have higher level of soft skills are more likely to be recruited and promoted in their jobs whereas, lower level of soft skills has the adverse effect.

In this connection, it is worthwhile to discuss some of research works conducted in different parts of the globe. In this scenario, Vasanthakumari (2019) has concluded that soft skills are really essential qualities for employment. In the recruitment process the recruiting companies emphasize soft skills in their prospective candidates. Similarly, Chavan (2020)says that soft skills are remarkably significant because they are required not only for employment but also for career growth. At this juncture, it is worthwhile to cite Subedi (2018), who says if we cannot inculcate softs in our youths, they will be bound to go to the foreign countries for low pay job whereas we will invite foreign employees with high payment.

India based researcherChavan (2020) further opines that recruiters always seek soft skills in their prospective employees. Focusing on soft skills in youths, Cinque (2016) opines that there is an association between soft skills level and job market. She says that the youths who lack soft skills cannot get a job as easily as those who demonstrate higher level of soft skill efficiency.Chavan (2020) further opines that soft skills are significant for leadership promotion and achievement of positive results.

Unlike in the areas of employment and career growth there has not been substantial research conducted in the area of enhancing academic results through soft skills. Therefore, I have decided to conduct a mini study on this area. For this prime purpose, I selected Koteshwor Multiple Campus purposively and conducted a detailed study.

Methodology

It is often argued that research methodology is a road map to carry on the activities of research in a much harmonious way that avoids much confusion. Patel & Patel (2019) says that research methodology is concerned about scientific and systematic study of a particular research problem involving both process and product in a logical pattern.So, we have to follow a particular type of methodology for a particular research agenda. I have chosen narrative inquiry to regulate my research agenda.

Narrative inquiry

In the 20th century, from within the qualitative research, there developed narrative inquiry. Though my research was based on qualitative case study,it followed the narrative analysis technique. This analysis uses field texts, such as stories, autobiography, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, photos (and other artifacts), and life experience, as the units of analysis to research and understand the way people create meaning in their lives as narratives.

I would quote the following statement by Connelly and Clandinin, we chiefly use narrative technique in educational research because, most often, teachers are the story tellers (Connelly &Clandinin, 1990). Since I'm planning to do a case study it is logical to citeCreswell, who says we may use narrative form of representation in the case of case study, phenomenological study, ethnography, and biological study (Creswell, 1998).

Information Production, Sampling, and Meaning Making

According to Brewer (2000), data production methods are applied to obtain the social meanings through natural setting known as the field. My strategies included observation, field notes, and interviews. I developed open ended questions for interview. Similarly, I tried to be "reflexive". According to Brewer, (2000) reflexivity indicates the aim of the researcher to explore the involvement of the researcher with a special inquiry as s/he acts upon and influences the study.

For the selection of both research site and participants I applied purposive sampling. Koteshwor Multiple Campus Jadibuti, Kathmandu was the research site and the Campus Chief, President of Professors' Association, and Secretary of Student Union were my research participants. And the new comers in the college 10+2 level students were the main focus of my study.

After collecting the required information, I taped the interview and later transcribed for the purpose of full presentation or "analysis". Apart from interview, note taking

was continued throughout the data production period. The field texts and documents were collected for the purpose of finding logical patterns that provided insights into the research topic. Then the collected information was gathered under certain themes and patternswere analyzed to engender meaning that led to the conclusion.

Data Production

In this research, information was collected from my participants, through interviews, observation, and informal conversation. It was collected from secretary of Students' Union, President of Professors' Association, and the Campus Chief. The primary information is illustrated below in the narrative form.

Narratives from the Secretary of the Students' Union

While asked a question about his enrollment in the college, his observation as a student leader, and present scenario of the college, the Secretary of the Students' Union said:

As an individual from Udayapur district, I met the Campus Chief, had some interaction, and got convinced to study in this college. Similarly, I met some students here and got some feedback about the college and got enrolled in the college. I took Major English in the education faculty. It is obvious that I got appropriate teaching learning situation in the college because the college highlighted not only the academic activities but also the extra-curricular activities. Talking about another good thing of the college we have number of internal examinations that will help students prepare better for the board examination.I remained in this college for a long time sharing lots of ideas with the teachers and fellow students. The most noticeable problem here was the infrastructure related problem. In comparison to the past years, it has been improved a lot. We could not promote technology to the extent it could have been. For example, during lock down period, very small number of students attended the online classes. However, the college is advancing on internet facilities and learning apps. Another area that we, sometimes, have to compromise is that the students are not exposed to the practical classes to the full-fledged manner.(Source: Field Study, 2021)

In response to another question, concerning the soft skill practices in the college, the contribution of soft skills to the present academic results and future recruitment, he responded:

It is obvious that soft skills cannot be learned through the ongoing academic classes alone. It should be taught through socialization process. Soft skills are really required for overall personality development of students. Soft skills comprise of many things like regularity, punctuality, time management, taking part in every activity conducted by the college. If we conduct more activities related to soft skill practices in the college and encourage students to take part on them, they will be much smarter. Once students possess required soft skills, they handle question papers and even answer sheets in much better ways. At the same time they will be able to manage their time in examination. Therefore, soft skill has direct connection to hard skills in a sense that the better the soft skills the students have, the better marks they are likely to obtain in examination. As a student leader, I always want to emphasize on socialization in a sense that learners can learn many soft skills through the process of socialization. Whatever smart the candidates are academically, if they lack soft skills, they won't be employed. Therefore, soft skills are essential for both academic results enhancement and employment. (Source: Field Study, 2021)

Narratives from the President of Professors' Association

While asked how he has been observing the overall situation of the college, after discussing his previous academic and professional background, the president of Professors' Association spoke:

I am from the middle class family and started teaching at a school in Solukhumbu district as soon as I completed my SLC in the year 2035 BS. Together, I continued my certificate level in Bhojpur. After that, I became the Headmaster of a school and even completed my Bachelors degree in 2046 BS. Not only this but also, I promoted the school in terms of level and in terms of infrastructures. Later on, I worked in some INGOs and got lots of experiences from them. Side by side I kept on studying and completed Masters degrees in two disciplines. As I was interested in teaching, I joined this college on first Baishakh 2068 BS and continued my career as a teacher. My association with the INGO is continued. As a professional teacher and as the president of Professors' Association' I am involved in different activities of the college. There are many good things about the college, particularly, the talented and experienced faculties of the college are assets of the college. However, we

have an average academic result. I wish, our academic result could be much better. (Source: Field Study, 2021)

To recommend a few things to the college administration and management he further says:

It is advisable that all of the financial aspects will be made more transparent. Secondly, it is a good idea to maintain an organizational structure and provide everyone a designated job description. If we can do these things, many issues in the college will be sorted out.(Source: Field Study, 2021)

While asked how he would assess the role of soft skills in an academic institution like this, he again said,

 Many of the students in this college have come from a very different rural background. Many of them even could not attend their schools and school activities regularly. Therefore, they lack soft skills like social skills, etiquette, manners, use of technology etc. It is obvious, that the college has to teach them these skills, not only for their future career, but also for academic enhancement. There is important role of soft skills in the academic institution like this. Whatever they do in the future that does not matterenhancing soft skills counts a lot in everyone's life. The college, particularly, focuses on hard skills. It lays emphasis on a few soft skills only. At the same time, we usually don't connect soft skills with the academic enhancement. Therefore, the college does not highlight soft skills in the learning, teaching, and evaluation process properly. (Source: Field Study, 2021)

In the course of responding to my concern whether he believes that we can improve our academic results with the support of soft skills, he spoke:

Since our students are from different background they lack many common soft skills. That is to say, they even lack skills about how to use a sheet of paper and how to handle a question paper in the examination. They don't know the importance of having a textbook and being regular and punctual in the academic classes. Despite the fact that they know the answers of many questions, they don't understand the question and spoil their examination. So to speak, they lack many tricks to handle the examination questions. Therefore, I firmly believe that we can improve our academic results with the support of soft skills. I further believe, apart from hard skills, many soft skills

including the skill of using technology count a lot for employment and career growth. (Source: Field Study, 2021)

Narratives from the Campus Chief

While asked him to briefly tell his previous life before joining the Koteshwor Multiple Campus, the Campus Chief responded:

As a resident of Khotang district, I passed the SLC from Mahendrodaya Secondary SchoolKhotang. Similarly, I passed IA from Mahendra Multiple Campus, Dharan in the year 2052 B.S. and BA from Janata Multiple College in 2054 BS. Likewise, I completed M.A. in English from Kirtipur. Then in the year 2059 BS I joined Koteshwor Multiple Campus as a lecturer in English. Later, in the year 2063 BS I did M Phil in English from Pokhara University and recently I have completed MBS from Nepal Commerce Campus, Minbhawan. Talking about my career, immediately after I completed my Masters degree, I started teaching English in the Central Department of English, Kirtipur. After I completed two sessions over there, they started Mastersprogram in English in Biratnagarand a team led by the then Campus Chief of Biratnagar Campus met and requested me to go to Biratnagar Campus as a Masters program coordinator (English) in contract basis. But the craze of Kathmandu did not let me go to Biratnagar. If I had gone there, it would have been a turning point in my career as most probably I would have been appointed in the permanent post and promoted to some senior posts. Connecting to my leadership position, the then Campus Chief told me that I was one of the potential candidates to become the Campus Chief. Furthermore, he added that the then chairperson of the campus management committee, too, would take my name. Therefore, he advised me to be prepared to lead the campus. Immediately after that I thought about the different shortcomings of the campus and I got mentally prepared to lead the campus with the view to uplift the campus to a greater height as I had a vision to lead the campus. In the beginning I worked as an Acting Campus Chief for six months. I started working as the Campus Chief from the year 2068 B.S. (Source: Field Study, 2021)

While asked him to provide further information about his association to the campus he categorically added:

Ever since sacrificing all other opportunities, I worked for the Koteshwor Multiple Campus. I give my whole time from early morning to the late evening to the campus. With the help of all concerned, I have been able to uplift the overall situation of this campus to a greater height. However, we have

many more things to do. The immediate target is QAA certification. Another target is to convert this campus as a constituent campus of proposed Bagmati University. Otherwise, promoting all required infrastructures and facilities, we will be the constituent campus affiliated to Tribhuvan University. It is a real fact that our campus has much higher recognition now. Talking about the academic results, we haveaverage results in comparison to the level of our intake. That is to say, many of our students are from the rural areas of the country. Moreover, ours is a heterogeneous classroom. However, we need to work more for the better results.(Source: Field Study, 2021)

Interacting with a question connected to soft skills in term of enhancing the academic results he further told many more things:

Soft skills count a lot not only for employment but also for academic enhancement. Soft skills like regularity, punctuality, time management, properly handling questions papers and answer sheets are important for enhancement of academic results. Very recently, we have the policy of conducting both formative and summative examination. In the past we did not highlight formative test. If we had focused on formative test, students would have learnt many soft skills like technology related presentation skills, observation skills, report writing, and critical thinking. Similarly, students can learn many soft skills through co-curricular activities which can be supportive to academic activities. Through formative examinations we can teach students many soft skills which will be useful for the final examination. Summative evaluation alone cannot enhance soft skills of our students.   Unless we enhance soft skills students cannot retain hard skills. Therefore, soft skills play important role to promote academic results. Furthermore, soft skills are really essential for employment and promotion. (Source: Field Study 2021)

Engendering Meaning

It is obvious that engendering meaning is entirely distinctive in narrative inquiry in comparison to other research designs. As narrative is the primary information to elucidate, the researcher gets meaning with the help of stories (Hutchinson, 2019). He further says that the researcher won't divide stories into individual concepts, codes and words. In this context, it is meaningful to quote the following:

> Meaning-making in narrative inquiry moves beyond traditional qualitative data analysis that allows researchers and readers to think with the stories of participants, engaging with the participants'

experience(s) in new ways as the researcher and reader brings their own stories of experience to bear in the text; making meaning and imagining experience from new perspectives (Hutchinson, 2019, p.79).

Focusing on the step of meaning making, Manning and Adrianne (2014) opine for the purpose of meaning making a large bulk of qualitative methods highlight observation particularly in the natural setting. That is the reason why I attempted to make meaning about the roles of soft skills in enhancing academic results observing my participants also. That is to say, I always considered their emotions, moral obligation, compassion, and cravings to a large extent. Needless to say, I always considered social circumstances, time, and place while engendering meaning because getting meaning in association to their experiences and events is more scientific. While talking about personal relationship, establishing rapport with the participants is of paramount significance.

I attempted to analyze themes, patterns, and over all narratives with a view to engender meaning, as it is applicable to qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). I developed some themes based on collected data and I analyzed patterns, themes, structures, and dialogic performance (Riessman, 2008; Creswell, 2013). At this juncture, it is worthwhile to say that my research article is completely theorized in a sense that all parts of it are connected to each other.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the concept of soft skills goes back to the Vedic Era, in our context, the term soft skills has been a new entry. Traditionally, we only focused on hard skills very often known as technical and academic skills. The state, educational practitioners and academic institutions always focused on hard skills alone in our context. Similar practices continued in the western societies also. But after 1970s and 1980s western societies started focusing on soft skills in academic institutions. Now, they really highlight soft skills, particularly, for employment and career growth. Therefore, academic institutions also started giving enough space for soft skills.

In our context, the concept of soft skills got formal entry with the inception of SSRP. Ever since, some authorities under the ministry of education and sports are giving some spaces to soft skills.Ministry of Education while framing School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), has clearly stated, as per the statement of National Curriculum Framework apparent vision on soft skills, value based education, and life skills would be prescribed based on school level education (Ministry of Education, 2016). Therefore, it is understandable that Curriculum Development Centre has incorporated some soft skills courses in school level. Many training related organizations in Nepal are giving

some spaces to soft skills when they focus on employment and career growth. That is the reason why many educated individuals are aware about the concept of soft skills but majority of general Nepali citizens are still unaware about the term soft skills and its concept. I found that all three of my participants are well aware about the concept of soft skills and they are even worried about the lack of soft skills among our teenagers and the youths.

It was an amazing experience to collect data from my participants mostly personally, and sometimes with the help of my research assistant. My participants' readiness to provide necessary information really eased my research. Equally interesting was my job of data transcription and translation. Needless to say, I engendered meaning through theme and pattern analysis.

Through the process of data analysis, I came to the conclusion that there is a great role of soft skills to enhance academic results. Soft skills support to retain hard skills and to enhance academic results. Many negligible soft skills like punctuality, regularity, ways of using a sheet of paper properly, and handling question papers in examination hall are supportive elements for academic results. Apart from that through different extra-curricular and co-curricular activities students can learn many soft skills like socialization, report writing, presentation, handling modern means of communication, critical thinking and scientific exploration. It is understandable that all these soft skills are supportive to hard skills or academic skills. Apart from this, another finding I got is that soft skills support individuals for employment and career growth. This finding also validates the previous findings on soft skills.

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