

Hilda Martens, Styn Grieten*, *, Sven DeWeerd*, Nathalie Schippers**

**EXPERIENCES WITH TRAINING IN SOCIAL SKILLS:
DESIGN AND STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS.
A CASE STUDY AT THE FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT
OF THE LIMBURG UNIVERSITY CENTRE**

In this article we discuss the design of our social skills course for management students at the Limburg University Centre. Social skills consist of three interrelated components: a cognitive, a performance and an attitudinal component. Teaching frameworks are: Kolb's experiential learning model and the idea that learning happens in three iterative stages. We make use of different didactical approaches and interventions: theoretical lectures, discussion groups, supervised seminars and independent study tasks and activities. The social skills course lasts 30 hours and is spread over 10 weeks.

We measure the effectiveness of the course on different levels, based upon four sources of information. For the reaction level we use evaluative surveys with open questions answered by the students at the end of the last class. For the measurement of the learning level we use a traditional exam and a questionnaire with a pre- and post test and a control group. For the behavioural level, we check whether students keep thinking about their working points three months after the training.

We can conclude that the goals on a cognitive level are met. However the most important contribution is at the attitudinal level, a positive effect on the learnability dimension. Since believing in learnability is indispensable to acquire and practise social skills, this is a very important finding. That 63% of our students explicitly state that they have made progress 3 months after the course shows that they put their beliefs into practice. These results will be applied in future training and research.

INTRODUCTION

The market expects management graduates to have a sound theoretical background as well as good social skills. Job recruiters look for 'psychological grown-ups', i.e. flexible, assertive and creative people who can express themselves well and who easily adapt to different social contexts. It is not self-evident to actually teach social skills at Belgian universities. After some deep discussions social skills training was

* Limburg University Centre, Faculty of Management, Universitaire Campus, B-3590 Diepenbeek, Belgium

introduced in the management course at Limburg University Centre (LUC) in 1986. The aim of this is to acquire and practice the social skills needed to do group work, and to integrate these skills as much as possible so that students can apply them outside the class room and in their future careers.

In this article we will discuss the design of the social skills course at our Belgian university, how we measure the effectiveness of the course, the results and lessons to be drawn from these results, and questions for future research.

1. TEACHING SOCIAL SKILLS IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

It is necessary to say a few words on the context in which the course is taught, since teaching social skills in a university context is rather unusual. The Belgian university context has got some specific characteristics. Twenty-year old students have to take 10 to 15 obligatory subjects a year, have about 20 to 24 hours of classes a week and are expected to study an additional 20 to 25 hours a week. At LUC, half of the study programme is devoted to formal lectures while the other half is used for seminars and tutorials. The formal lectures are organized in large groups, while the seminars and tutorials are taught in smaller groups of approximately 35 students. Because of the exam system students are very much focused on reproducing and applying knowledge. Reflection on and training of their own behaviour seems irrelevant to them: it is not necessary to pass an exam! The consequence is that they are not really motivated or interested in taking a course on 'social skills'; they just consider it to be one of the many subjects they have to take in order to succeed.

The social skills course lasts 30 hours and is spread over 10 weeks. Staff support is restricted to 4 staff members. Together they spend 180 hours on supervision and coaching.

2. DESIGN OF THE SOCIAL SKILLS COURSE

2.1. Defining social skills

“A skill is the ability to demonstrate a system and sequence of behaviour that is functionally related to attaining a performance goal” (Boyatzis 1982, 33). No single action constitutes a skill. If we look at people with excellent

negotiation skills for example, we see that they know what sequence of actions should be taken to propose or summarize viewpoints and to present advantages and disadvantages of different opinions. They can separate primary ideas from secondary ideas and are able to organize their thoughts in a logical way. They also know how to simplify convoluted ideas. But none of these acts is a skill in itself. A skill is a sequence of behaviour that can be applied in many different situations.

Skills are dependent on knowledge in the sense that a person must know *what* to do, *how* to do it and *when* to do it. However, there is a difference between knowing when to do what and realizing how good one actually is at doing it. A skill is a proficiency at doing something, and goes beyond just knowing something about it.

Hargie (2000, 12) defines social skills as “the process whereby the individual implements a set of goal-directed, interrelated, situationally appropriate social behaviours which are learnt and controlled.”

In our view social skills consist of three interrelated components: (1) one should know what to do (the cognitive component); (2) one should know how to use a particular skill (the performance component); (3) and one should be able to sense what is appropriate in a particular situation (the attitudinal component = volitional and emotional).

2.2. Learning social skills

The design of our course is based on Kolb’s experiential learning model and on the idea that learning happens in three iterative (and thus not chronological) stages. We will first expand a little on Kolb’s model and will then discuss the three stages in the student’s learning process.

2.3. Kolb’s model

Kolb (1984, 29-31) emphasizes, consistent with social learning theory (Bandura 1977) that the development of behavioural skills comes from observation and practice. According to the Kolb model, comprehensive learning encompasses four elements: (1) active participation in a new experience (*concrete experience*); (2) examination of that experience (*reflective observation*); (3) integration of conclusions based on the new experience into workable theories (*abstract conceptualization*); and (4) application of these theories to new situations (*active experimentation*). If we apply this model to our own context, learning skills is maximized when

students get the opportunity to combine watching, thinking, and doing (Latham and Saari 1979b; Mainz & Sims 1981; Decker 1982). In all skill performance, practice as well as feedback on performance are essential for improvement. One should understand the skill both conceptually and behaviourally. In this sense, it is not practice alone which makes perfect: if a student knows and understands what he or she is doing wrong by getting feedback and advice, he or she can try to act upon this advice. Finally, it is important to use the skill often enough so that it becomes integrated into the student's behavioural repertoire (Johnson and Johnson 1975, 8-10).

2.4. Three stages in a student's learning process

We identify three different stages in a student's learning process: (1) the exploratory stage, (2) the elaboration stage and (3) the integration stage (De Weerd, 2001).

1. Exploratory stage. This first stage is often referred to as 'the problem stage'. Where students were not aware of their own behaviour earlier on, they now start to observe their own and others' behaviour and form their own opinions about it. Thus behaviour is no longer self-evident.

The student explores his or her own behaviour, and asks him/herself what aspects of his or her behaviour are worthwhile. He or she also wonders whether there are any alternatives to certain aspects of his or her behaviour that he or she would like to improve. If so, he or she may want to know whether you can actually learn how to apply these alternatives and whether he or she is interested enough to acquire these alternative forms of behaviour.

The student has passed through this first exploratory stage when he or she consciously states that he or she wants to change behaviour X and is willing to try alternative Y.

Some students will get stuck at this stage and will not move on to stages two and three. In this case, students only gain theoretical knowledge from the social skills course. They study what is in their books, but do not intend to practice or apply these insights to their own behaviour. Their social skills usually do not improve.

2. Elaboration stage. Students who have successfully passed stage one will now move from 'wanting to change' to 'knowing how to change'. They ask themselves "*What* is it that I need to do and *how* do I do it?". New, alternative behaviours are analysed, elaborated, taught and practiced. This process appears to be easy for some, but very hard for others: on the one

hand we have students who have successfully passed stage one and do not find it difficult to put a new insight into practice. But others are very set in their ways and find it hard to change good old habits. At this stage it is extremely important to give students the opportunity to practice and to give feedback on their performances.

3. Integration phase. At this stage students integrate or incorporate their new social skills so that they can start using them in appropriate real-life situations without having to think about it. Using the newly acquired skill should become an automatism.

Integrating new social skills and thereby changing ingrained habits tends to be a long and difficult process that is to be continued outside the classroom.

2.5. Teaching social skills

2.5.1. The exploratory stage

The exploratory stage is extremely important when teaching social skills. Getting students motivated to work on their social skills is a precondition for change.

Students have opinions and expectations of what they can and cannot learn or change in their behaviour and in interaction with others. These ideas can be considered mental models (Senge, 1994) or metacognitions. A mental model represents a number of presuppositions, or a mentality or way of thinking about a particular phenomenon. It is an aid to look at a more complex reality in a particular way. Although certain models can help us discover certain aspects of a phenomenon, they can also blind us to some aspects. Masui (2001, 32) states that metacognitive knowledge is about cognitive functioning. It can be knowledge about personal traits, tasks, strategies, procedures or condition and is partly objective (or general), and partly subjective (or personal).

Openness to personal mental models or metacognitions is of utmost importance during the social skills classes: attitudes, metacognitions or mental models act as learning conditions. Let us illustrate this with an example. A student may be confronted with his or her fellow students' assertive reactions. He or she may conclude that this assertiveness is better than his or her own sub-assertive behaviour. Now, if this student believes that he or she will never be able to react as assertively as his fellow students because he or she is shy, no change in behaviour will be brought about. By

performing activities in which others confront him or her with the idea that assertiveness can be learned, he or she may want to find out how to learn it. This is a first step in the direction of becoming more assertive. As long as one is convinced that changing or improving one's own behaviour is impossible, there is no motivation and willingness to learn.

In order to overcome this unwillingness, staff members can try to bring about changes in the student's mental model by having deep conversations. This method may not be successful though, because it is difficult to get through to people with very fixed ideas. One can also try to change attitudes or mental models by involving students in simulation games and role plays: when acting themselves, students have to react to the given situation; and by observing their peers, students may discover alternative behaviours. These personal performances and observations can then be questioned and discussed in group. This method often works well. A final way of building attitudes is to touch people emotionally, but this method is very hard to use and guide in a university course.

2.5.2. The elaboration stage

At the elaboration stage, instructors need to think how students can acquire certain social skills. It is indispensable to know what a person should do when he or she wants to change him/herself. We offer a range of exercises, role plays and simulation games so that students are forced to think about alternative behaviours. Reflecting on your own and other people's behaviour can be enlightening here: it is instructive to see what one does and what the consequences of these actions are. When discussing this in group, students are invited to think about behavioural alternatives. If there are any, they can try them out and practice them. Showing model behaviour on video may be helpful as well.

2.5.3. The integration stage

The integration stage is mostly realized outside the class room. We try to support and encourage students to go through this stage by creating open-task-tension and by focusing on long-term perspectives. Students should keep working on their own skills because they themselves want to improve these skills, not because they have to in order to pass an exam. One way to facilitate integration is by asking the students at the end of each course to write down one skill they would like to practice in the upcoming week. In order to get some feedback and support on their own performance, we ask students to pair up, so that they can continually monitor each other's

behaviour and coach each other if necessary. At the end of the week students write down their positive and negative experiences and formulate ways to improvement. These will then be discussed in the next class.

The social skills course is wound up with a letter writing session. A second way to facilitate integration is by means of a letter writing session. Students write a letter to themselves in which they mention a few skills that they would like to keep working on and also formulate a plan of action. Then, the students put their letters in closed envelopes and hand them in. Three months later supervisors will send these letters back to them.

In order to make the social skills course attractive and useful for all students, we confront our students with real-life situations; make them do practical as well as observation exercises so that they reflect on behaviours of themselves and others. Some students will benefit most from the course by answering exploratory questions and by reacting to statements. Others learn more by practising social skills and by comparing their own with other people's behaviour. In this way they can discover their own strengths and weaknesses. Still others may want to find out how they can actually improve their own skills and the most advanced group may already be thinking about how to integrate new skills in real-life situations.

We allow students to act freely because there is a great difference in social skills among them. Some are chairs of youth clubs or student organizations and already have a lot of experience with running clubs and leading groups. Others have no experience with these sorts of matters at all. Depending on their level of experience, students need more or less energy to question their own mental models and to discover which skills they want to acquire and practise.

Our teaching method can be clearly related to Kolb's cycle: supervisors sometimes start with a group exercise or ask students to try out a particular skill. Students observe their peers and as a group they reflect on their own performances by asking questions. We then relate these personal experiences to theoretical frameworks. Sometimes we work the other way around: students are given a theoretical framework and are asked to look for applications of this framework.

We vary different working methods in order to reach and address students with different learning strategies. It is important that students with different learning styles, learning experiences and experience levels all get the opportunity to make progress. In this way every single student, whether experienced or not, should be able to benefit from our social skills classes.

2.6. Contents and goals of the social skills course

If we want to teach social skills to future managers, we have to define which social skills are worth working on. A number of studies have sought to identify social or interpersonal skills needed for managerial success (Porras & Anderson 1981; Levine 1982; Whetton & Cameron 1993; AACSB 1993; Yukl 1990). A careful review of these studies indicates that, despite the widely varying terminology, certain skills tend to surface on most lists, effective communication for instance, broken down into listening, interviewing and providing feedback. Motivation, which can be broken down into goal setting, persuading, empowering people and providing feedback, is another skill that features on most lists. Handling conflicts, negotiating, running meetings, coaching and team building are also considered important managerial skills.

Given our current stage of knowledge, these are the interpersonal skills that most experts believe effective managers have and prospective managers need to develop (Robbins 1996, 5). But since we only have limited time and staff, we have to make choices and think about achievable goals.

Evaluative surveys show that students are particularly interested in finding out more about communication, assertiveness, creativity, conflict management, expressing criticism, holding meetings and giving presentations. These are the social skills they think they will need in their future careers.

This is why we decided to work only on the following skills: communication and feedback, problem solving and decision making in group, conflict management and assertiveness; holding meetings and giving presentations.

Within our broad definition of social skills we mentioned three different components: (1) a cognitive, (2) a performance and (3) an attitudinal or metacognitive component. We kept these components in mind when formulating aims and goals:

(1) Students should gain *insight* in group processes and conditions for successful group work as well as in their own behaviour within a group and the effects of their behaviour on the group. In this way, they will discover possibilities and opportunities to increase personal effectiveness.

(2) Students should *develop skills* in order to be able to work more effectively in a group and in order to be able to make a valuable contribution to the group. To do so, students need to learn how to deliberate on a matter, how to give presentations, how to hold a meeting and how to express

constructive criticism. On top of all this, they also need to learn how to analyse problematic situations: why was communication between group members not running smoothly, what went wrong in a given presentation, why was a talk or meeting not efficient?

(3) Students should realize what part they play in a social context. How do they behave in social contact with others? Are they aware of and sensitive to the emotional and interpersonal dimension of relations and contacts?

It is absolutely essential that students are willing to change their *mental models* or attitudes: they should reflect on their own social strengths and weaknesses, so that they change habits and improve skills.

Group work can only be successful if students are willing to achieve results in a group and as a group. If every group member is open to and understanding of other people's viewpoints (empathy) and if he or she dares to express his or her own opinion (assertiveness), the group as a whole can weigh up the pros and cons and come to a range of creative solutions.

2.7. Didactical approach

The social skills course lasts 30 hours and is spread over 10 weeks. In weeks two, four, six and eight students get a theoretical lecture of one and a half hour. This lecture is useful to explain theory and to show videos.

In the next one and a half hour students get some time to process this information by discussing it and by doing various exercises in small groups of 4 to 5 students. There is only one supervisor per 100 students, which means that students basically work independently. These sessions are obligatory and are called 'discussion groups'.

In the odd weeks students can choose from two programmes. They either choose to attend seminars in which they explore a few topics in depth by doing e.g. role plays and simulation exercises under supervision of a staff member. Seminars are organized in groups of fifteen students. In this way students get the opportunity to learn by doing: they observe and discuss their own behaviour and the parts they play in specific social situations. Attending these seminars requires a lot of involvement from the students: they should be open to discuss their own behaviour in group and have to participate actively. Therefore it is very important for students to consciously choose to attend the seminars.

Students who do not want to be involved in group discussions about their own behaviour can opt for the second programme. In this case, they work in small groups of four to five students. It is their task to deduce practical

suggestions or pieces of advice from the topics touched upon during the theoretical lecture. Once they have formulated these suggestions they should hold a meeting in which they demonstrate what they have learned. They record their meeting. The recording should last seven to twenty minutes. Afterwards the group writes down their strengths and weaknesses and formulates a plan of action to overcome these weaker points.

The majority of our students prefer the first programme, while only 10% choose to do the second programme. The exam is the same for all students. It consists of practical and theoretical questions about the characteristics of successful communication, feedback and assertiveness and accounts for half of the marks. The other half goes to continuous assessment: skills can only be acquired by practicing. Continuous assessment is also an extra stimulus for students to participate regularly and actively in the programme. During the seminars, we assess the quality of preparatory written tasks and the student's active participation in discussions, role plays and simulations. In the second (video) programme, we check to what extent students have used and illustrated key elements of the course on their recordings and assess the quality of their written evaluation.

Our staff members make use of different didactical approaches and interventions: theoretical lectures, discussion groups, supervised seminars and independent study tasks and activities (e.g. the video recording).

The theoretical lectures are necessary to discuss and focus on a particular skill by reflecting and questioning alternative behaviours and by looking at the effects of these alternatives. We provide theoretical frameworks in which these alternatives fit and illustrate this by showing videos. Then, we try to discover and discuss personal mental models.

These are further explored and absorbed in the discussion groups. Theoretical frameworks are put into practice and students become more aware of their stronger and weaker social skills.

In the supervised seminars, students get the opportunity to improve these weaker skills by practicing them in role plays, by giving presentations and by doing communicative, feedback and reasoning exercises. Observation and discussion of different attitudes and their effects are crucial here. Personal mental models are discussed and students are encouraged to try out different behavioural alternatives.

The independent study task is a good alternative for students who prefer to process the theoretical information in small groups. By simulating and recording an ideal meeting and by discussing their own social strengths and weaknesses, they too become more aware of how to use social skills.

We believe that - given the limited time and staff - our course design is maximally effective: it takes into account the great differences in motivation, metacognitions and experience levels and skills of our students. The result is that every student can benefit from the course, either by questioning his or her own mental model, by discussing and realizing what his or her weaknesses are, by deciding which skills are worth practising and improving, by formulating a plan of action, or by observing other people's behaviour.

3. EVALUATIVE SURVEY

3.1. Research into the effectiveness of the social skills course: purpose and methodology

We want to measure and increase the effectiveness of our social skills course and interpret these results in order to improve it. We want to have a close and critical look at our goals, approaches and means and see whether the course can be adjusted and optimized.

The effectiveness of our course can be assessed on different levels. Kirkpatrick's model is often cited in the literature (1983). He specifies four levels in measuring training effectiveness: (1) the reaction level; (2) the learning level; (3) the behavioural level and (4) the result level.

The reaction level is often referred to as the happy level: if you ask participants to evaluate a course at the very end of it, they often feel satisfied. The results are thus attitudinal or subjective rather than objective. Evaluation at the reaction level does not measure the learning that took place. However, a 'good' feeling about the training environments is relevant: it can engender learning and it certainly impacts on attitudes.

The learning level is concerned with cognitive, affective and motoric elements. Cognition includes concepts or principles, facts techniques and cognitive skills. Behavioural skills (affective or motoric) may be more difficult to measure. Actual performance of skills may be viewed and studied on videotape for example. Although the written test or final examination is the usual method of verifying learning levels in traditional education, performance based evaluation e.g. actually demonstrating a skill is a preferred measurement tool here.

The behavioural level relates to an assessment of how well the learned materials were actually transferred to on-the-job performance.

The result level is associated with the overall evaluation. It is called the reflective level and evaluates whether organizations or future employers notice the effect of the social training on the organization as a whole, in terms of costs, return on investment and quality changes (VIZO:1999).

We limit our evaluation to the first two levels and basically use three sources of information.

In order to measure the reaction level, we make use of evaluative surveys with open questions answered by the students at the end of the last class. For the measurement of the learning level, we use a traditional exam and a questionnaire with a pre- and post test and a control group.

Because of our limited number of staff, we prefer to use our manpower optimally for training and not for performance based evaluation, although that would be interesting. So we restrict our evaluation to paper and pencil tests. Checking whether students actually apply the newly acquired social skills outside the class room, e.g. in youth clubs or in their future professional careers seems unrealistic to us. Still we try to find out whether students think about the skills that they intended to keep working on in a letter to themselves. Hence, we used a brief questionnaire.

So, we use four instruments to assess the effectiveness of our course:

1. At the end of the last class students assess the contents and learning approaches of the course by filling out a form with four open questions and six statements.

The open questions that they answered were:

- (1) What do you think is positive or negative about the concept of alternating large group sessions with small group sessions;
- (2) what do you think is positive or negative about the theoretical lecture and the discussion groups;
- (3) what do you think is positive or negative about the contents and working methods during the seminars;
- (4) describe one or a few situations in which you felt you were actually learning something.

Then, we asked them to judge the following six statements on a scale of one to seven:

- (1) The seminars were good to get to know the other group members.
- (2) In my opinion, the seminars were interesting.
- (3) I learned something during the seminars.
- (4) The seminars helped me to put theory into practice.

(5) Thanks to the seminars, I became more convinced that personal behaviour can be changed.

(6) The supervisors of the small group sessions did a good job.

2. The written exam can assess whether students have reached the goals on a cognitive level. Do students know what the characteristics of good feedback are? Can they identify and correct a bad intervention? Are they able to paraphrase an emotional intervention? Do they have the skills to write a suitable introduction to a meeting? Can they identify what goes wrong e.g. in a decision making procedure and are they able to give advice to improve this procedure? Although these are all rather practical questions, the written exams only measures whether students *know* 'what' one should do and 'how' one should do it. But knowing 'what' to do and 'how' to do it does not guarantee that they can actually put this knowledge into practice.

3. The evaluative questionnaire is a means to measure the effectiveness of our teaching approach. Do students feel that their social skills have improved, and if so, in what way?

On top of that, we are also interested in the correlation between three independent variables and the degree of improvement: (1) cognitive significance; (2) emotional significance and (3) interpersonal safety (De Weerd:2000). To what extent do they determine the change in social skills?

Students are presented with the same questionnaire before the course starts (pre-test) and one month after the course (post-test). Second-year management students are the subjects of our research (hereafter 'the subject group'), while the control group is formed by second-year students of business engineering who did not participate in the social skills course. The management and business engineering students studied together in their first year of university education. Both groups fill out the questionnaires at the same time. In this way, we hope to be able to obviate maturity effects.

In 1999–2000 we drew up a questionnaire and presented it to our students. We used statements probing into the student's behaviour as well as attitudinal statements to investigate the student's attitude towards a number of social skills. These statements are closely connected with the goals and contents of the chapters dealt within the course.

By performing a factor analysis, we have tried to formulate a meaningful set of statements for each scale. The pre-test was only used to improve the questionnaire. Based on the results of the factor analysis we optimized the statements and added a few to the list that was used in 2000–2001. In this way we constructed our Likert-like scales.

In the end, we had 45 statements for six scales. Every statement was assessed on a scale from one to five ranging from (1) I absolutely disagree to (5) I absolutely agree.

By calculating the Cronbach alpha we will investigate whether the items on each scale are internally consistent. Only the creativity scale has a rather low value. The different scales are presented here.

Questionnaire 2000

(!! = score to be inverted)

1. Learnability: Can social skills be learned? (alpha = .6664)

7-!! Easily making contacts is a gift – it is not a skill that you can learn and practice.

40-!! Making good presentations is something you cannot learn – you either have it in you, or you don't.

19- It is possible to change certain habits or ways of making contact.

29- People of a shy nature can overcome their shyness or timidity.

12- Making good presentations is a skill that you can acquire by making careful preparations and by practising a lot.

45-!! If a person finds it difficult to stand up for his/her opinions, he/she will not be able to change that, or work on that.

2. Reflection (alpha = .7260)

41- If you think about the things that happen within a group, you can actually help the group forward.

24- Reflecting on everyone's role within the group will help you make improvements to the group.

2- If every group member took some time to reflect on his/her own behaviour, the group as a whole would benefit from it and team spirit would improve.

50-!! Taking time to look back upon the way we worked together as a group is a waste of time.

20- Whenever I feel any friction between myself and other group members, I think about how to solve this situation.

30- I make a proposal to the group. The group doesn't accept my proposal. I try to find out why they turned down my proposal.

46- I often reflect on the way I deal with other people.

8- When something goes wrong with the collaboration between group members, I think about my part in this failure.

3. Assertiveness (alpha = .6790)

36- When I feel that someone doesn't take enough notice of me, it is my duty to let him/her know.

3- Whenever a good friend does something that I don't like, I tell him off.

25- If the others are gossiping and it bothers me, I will tell them that it annoys me.

31- Within a group, I often suggest to discuss our schedule and method of working.

4. Belief in groups versus individualism (alpha = .7222)

4- If a group has to sort out a difficult problem consisting of many different aspects, it is easier to have one person search for the solution than to solve the problem in group.

17-!! It is as easy to come up with a creative solution all by yourself as in group.

49- It is easier to come up with a creative solution in group than on your own.

37-!! I don't really believe in teamwork.

32 You learn more in group than on your own.

42 It is more efficient to work in group than on your own.

5. Creativity (.4966)

27- Madcap ideas (in a group work) often lead to new and useful ideas.

38- When the group has to solve a particular problem, the first thing we do is organizing a brainstorming session to find a solution to the problem.

10- If I am confronted with a problem, I will try to look at it from different angles.

5- If I have a crazy idea in the middle of a group discussion, I won't hesitate to share it with the group.

54- Even if the group decides on a solution to a particular problem, I will keep on looking for other/better solutions.

6. Interpersonal communication: empathy (.7629)

6- Regularly gathering the opinions of all group members certainly isn't a waste of time.

28- Rephrasing other people's ideas or suggestions helps the group forward.

35- I can learn from other people's comments on my behaviour.

52- If you tell a person what you think about him/her and the things that he/she does, he/she can learn from these comments.

11- I find it important to take some time to listen to my friends' problems.

18- I empathize with the stories my friends tell me.

44- If someone comes up with a good idea in a group discussion, I will let that person know.

23-!! I tend to stop listening if I don't really understand what a person is saying.

39- If I don't understand what a discussion is all about, I will ask for some clarification.

48- I try to empathize with people who find themselves in difficult or annoying situations.

16- I tell the others how they come across.

4. Questions about the effect of the letter students wrote to themselves.

In order to encourage students to continue to work on their social skills outside the class room, we ask them to write a letter to themselves in which they mention a few points of interest or skills that they would like to improve and in which they draw up a plan of action. They put these letters in closed envelopes and hand them in. Two months later instructors will send these letters to their students. We have the impression that some students take this letter writing task seriously, while others just want to get it over quickly and do not give it much thought. However, we cannot verify this impression because the letters are put in closed envelopes.

After another three months, we gave our students a brief questionnaire and ask them whether they had received and read the letter; whether they still recognized their own points of interest; whether they had made any progress at the time they got the letter; whether re-reading the letter had any effect on their behaviour; whether their intentions and points of interest had changed; and whether reading the letter was a good way to remind them of their intentions and their action plans.

3.2. Results of the different investigation methods into the effects of the course

3.2.1. Student evaluations

We received 138 fully completed forms, equally spread over the different seminar groups. This means that 79% of the 175 participants actually responded. In the following discussion we only mention student reactions that appeared several times (5 to 10 times). The most common reactions are mentioned first.

Students find the lectures useful because specific examples and the videos help them to understand the subject matter. Some mention that the discussion groups were also useful to put theory into practice and to process some of the information given. But the overall criticism from our students is that both sessions (three hours with only a short break in between) are too long to stay focused. They appreciate the seminar sessions better than the theoretical lectures and the discussion groups.

Students indicate that active participation in seminars helps them to process theoretical information. By putting theory into practice, difficult chapters of the course become clearer so that students need less time to study the subject matter afterwards. They find it interesting to simulate a particular situation and to react to it, e.g. by giving feedback. "By giving your own

presentations and by learning how to hold a meeting you learn how to behave in specific situations". By observing your own behaviour, you actually become more aware of it. You get to know more about yourself and the others.

Students are also positive about the provided feedback, the wide range of exercises and the supervision. They find it interesting to start from real-life situations and to actively take part in discussions and activities. Even the shy students get very involved because they feel comfortable enough to express their thoughts and opinions. Students feel at ease with their supervisor because he/she acts as a guide rather than a teacher; someone who is a member of the group, rather than the person in charge. In this way, the group gets to know each other well and team spirit is created.

The topics and skills discussed are practical and useful enough to apply them in daily life and in business contexts. Although students may be familiar with the topics before the course starts, the topics are still interesting because they are interrelated and discussed in depth.

Students strongly appreciate it that they are invited to be creative and to take the initiative to do and practise things. There are plenty of opportunities to participate actively and to practise a wide range of skills.

Students are less satisfied about the following aspects of the course: they sometimes find it difficult to understand the assignments during the seminars. According to them some of the situations to be acted out are unrealistic. Expressing personal opinions, reacting to specific situations, and giving feedback on others' performances is found to be difficult because the simulations or role plays happen too fast. The theory seems boring and difficult to some students, and becomes only clear when put into practice. Some topics are dilated upon too extensively, e.g. giving presentations. Sometimes preparatory exercises are not discussed in class, which gives students the feeling that their efforts are in vain. Some exercises are repeated too often. Because role plays are acted out by volunteers, the same students often take the floor.

When asked to describe a few moments when they felt they were actually learning something, students mention a wide range of topics, but giving feedback, active listening, learning how to give presentations and to hold meetings were most often mentioned. A few reactions: "Now I know how and when to be assertive". "The seminar discussions were very informative and interesting". "You learn a lot from the feedback provided after each presentation".

From the students' judgements on a scale of one to seven we can conclude the following: the statement "The supervisors of the seminars did a good job" gets the highest score with an average of 5.7. "The small group sessions helped me to put theory into practice." is placed second with an average of 5.46. "The small group sessions were good to get to know the other group members" scores 5.28. "I learned something during the small group sessions" comes fourth with a score of 5.14 and "In my opinion the small group sessions were interesting" gets an average of 5.10. We can conclude that students are generally positive about the working approaches used during the seminars.

The statement "Thanks to the small group sessions I became more convinced that personal behaviour can be changed" gets the lowest score with an average of 4.66. We would certainly like to improve this and will expand on it in the discussion.

3.2.2. Traditional exam results

156 out of 175 students took the exam. Therefore we will only take these 156 students into consideration. The exam results were satisfactory: all students passed the exam. Only 13.5% of the students scored between 50 and 60 out of 100, which means that almost 90% got a score of 60 and more: 47.4% of the students scored between 60 and 70 points, 32% between 70 and 80 points and 7% scored above 80. We can conclude from these results that the majority of our students are capable of reaching the cognitive goals.

3.3.3. The questionnaire: a quantitative investigation

Due to some practical problems only 100 fully completed forms were submitted by the subject group and 84 fully completed forms by the control group. This means that we have a response of 64% for the subject group and 66% for the control group.

We have analysed the data on two different levels:

1. Poisson regression model: the analysis is based on a count of the positive changes between the pre- and post-test for every scale. The analysis is performed per group (subject group v. control group) and per gender (male v. female students). The number of positive changes forms the basis for our effect measurement.

The linear model that is used can be formulated as:

$$\text{Log}(m) = b_0 + b_1\text{GROUP} + b_2\text{GENDER} + b_3\text{GROUP*GENDER},$$

where group 1 = subject group, group 2 = control group.

We count the actual number of positive changes in order to avoid that extremes created by one sharp rise (e.g. from 1 to 5) would distort the results. So, a change from 1 to 2 is considered 1 positive change, while a change from 1 to 5 is also considered and counted as 1 positive change.

a) 'Learnability' : Can social skills be learned?

When looking at the number of positive changes (between pre-test and post-test scores) for the scale 'Learnability', we see that there is a significant difference between the subject group and the control group ($p = 0.0018$). The social skills course has managed to convince students that social skills can be learned.

b) Reflection

Contrary to our expectations there is no significant difference between the subject group and the control group when it comes to reflection skills ($p=0.2699$). Moreover, there were less positive changes in the subject group than in the control group which is very surprising.

c) Assertiveness

Concerning the assertiveness scale, we only note a significant effect per gender: we count more positive changes for female students in post-test than in the pre-test ($p = 0.0087$). However, both these rises in positive changes can be noted both for females belonging to the subject and the control group. Since there is no interaction between either gender or group, this change cannot be attributed to the social skills course.

d) Belief in groups versus individualism

The subject group did not indicate significantly more positive changes in their belief in the power of a group ($p=0.1480$), but the difference does move in the expected direction.

e) Creativity

For the variable creativity we notice another significant difference: after taking the social skills course students belonging to the subject group reported more positive changes in creativity than the control group ($p=0.0246$).

f) Empathy

There is no significant difference between the subject and control group when it comes to empathy.

2. Finally, we looked at the statements for which the subject group made considerable progress in comparison with the control group. A statement makes progress if more than 10% of the subject group respondents mark a positive change and if the control group respondents don't. These data will only be used in the discussion to clarify some results.

3.3.4. Brief questionnaire to measure the effects of the personal letter

104 questionnaires about the letter writing activity were handed in from a total of 175 students. 82 students confirm that they have received and read their personal letter, 22 state that they either haven't received their letter (8) or haven't read it (14).

If we just concentrate ourselves on the students who confirm having received and read their personal letters, we see that 80% of them still recognize their own points of interest and intentions. 52 out of 82 or 63% believe that they have already made progress. 70% state that reading the letter did not have any effect on their behaviour, while for 23% of the students the letter did have an effect on them in the sense that it reminded them of their good intentions and motivated them to keep working on their plan of action. 47% say that reading the letter was just a good way to remind them of their plan of action three months after the course.

These figures maybe show that many students took this letter writing activity seriously, while others didn't. Maybe we can conclude that this activity is only valuable for students with a positive attitude towards change in their own behaviour. They will take some time to draw up a plan of action and will benefit from it later on. Other students will probably consider it just as another task or as a waste of time.

3.4. Interpretation and discussion

Is our social skills course effective? Do we reach our goals? We consider various evaluation levels within our general evaluation.

The first evaluation level is called '*the learning level*'. Did the course reach its goals on the cognitive level, the performance level and the attitudinal level? The quality of preparatory and processing exercises and the final exam results show that the cognitive expectations are certainly met. This is not surprising though: knowing how one should behave in a specific social context is not very difficult to grasp. Students do not need to understand complicated theoretical designs and frameworks in order to know what to do in a given social context. In this sense you cannot compare the social skills course with the tougher subjects of the management programme such as mathematics and economics. The result is that students tend to score considerably better on the social skills exam than on other tests (up to 10% better).

We did not evaluate the *performance level*, although this is probably the most important one. Unfortunately, we do not have the manpower and means to perform a pre- and post-test for this level.

In order to evaluate the *attitudinal level*, we use information gathered from the evaluative surveys and from the questionnaire. The evaluative survey was done at the end of the last class and shows that students find it very helpful to practice social skills in small groups. Students confirm that they become more aware of their own behaviour, get to know themselves and the others better and learn from the feedback. The topics and skills discussed in class are considered useful because they can be applied to real-life situations and business contexts. Creativity and active participation are also appreciated. Although this survey also provides us with suggestions for improvement, students generally seem to be very satisfied. A good feeling about the course is relevant and can engender learning and it certainly impacts on attitudes. But we should not be blinded by the results of this survey: high 'happiness' levels do not guarantee that much learning has taken place.

The pre- and post-questionnaire is the most important source of information to draw conclusions about the progress made on the attitudinal level. Students who participated in the social skills course seem to believe more in the learnability of social skills than students who did not participate in the course. This is an important finding: the participants in the course believe that they can improve their social skills and this belief is a precondition for actual change. If a person does not believe that social skills can be learned, he or she will never move on to the elaboration stage.

The subject group also makes progress when it comes to creativity. They find it more important to look for alternative solutions to problems and are more open to what seem to be madcap ideas. This may be due to the fact that they learn more about creativity in the course and that they are continually invited to be creative during the seminars.

We have already said that for the scales: reflection, assertiveness, belief in a group and empathy, no significant difference was found between the degree of progress made by the subject group and the control group. This may be due to the fact that the course is rather short and that we have to split the course into fragments. The consequence is that we can only briefly touch upon a number of topics and skills without going into depth. In order to elaborate and integrate skills, we may have to discuss and practise these skills more extensively. However, it is surprising to see that the subject group did not improve their reflection skills because reflection is often

practised during the seminars. It may be that the formal reflection moments held during the seminars do not lead to better reflection skills outside the class room at all. As for the empathy scale, the subject group only improves certain empathy skills. There are only 2 statements for which the subject group makes more progress than the subject group: giving feedback and paraphrasing.

'The *overall and behavioural levels*' were not evaluated. However, we did partly get an answer to the question '*Do students acquire social skills in general and in specific situations?*' From the brief questionnaire about the letter writing we know that at least 63% of our students who actually received and read the letter (52 out of 85) write they had got better at using certain social skills 3 months after the course. It would be interesting to compare this result with other research data, but we are still in the process of collecting them. It is difficult to find situations which are really comparable: courses with similar goals, contents, guidance, length, circumstances... Can we for instance compare these results with the results from a voluntary three day in-service training for tax officials with similar content, same teaching principles but different didactical approach (Martens, 2000)? After 8 weeks, one third of the tax officials attempted to use their work points once or more per week, two thirds 2 to 5 times during the 8 weeks; 78% of the respondents see effect or considerable effect when they practice their work points, 18% little effect and 4% no effect. Regarding the question as to whether *other persons* noted any effects, approximately 40% answered yes, 20% no, 40% possibly. But can we compare a voluntary in-service training with a compulsory university course?

CONCLUSION

We can conclude that the goals on a cognitive level are certainly met. After having taken the social skills course, students know what to do in a particular social context and also know how to do it. This knowledge does not guarantee though that they can actually put this knowledge into practice.

Our most important contribution is the change brought about at the attitudinal level. A person truly has to believe that social skills can be learned before he or she can actually change or improve their behaviour. Results have shown that our working approaches have got a positive effect on the learnability dimension. Since believing in learnability is indispensable to acquire and practise social skills, this is a very important finding.

The fact that 63% of our students explicitly state that they have made progress 3 months after the course, shows that we did not just change these students' attitudes towards learning social skills, but that they actually put their beliefs into practice.

These results will be applied in future training and research. Discussing these results over and over again in our team means that we put even more attention to these learnability dimension, as well as to the other dimensions in our social skills training.

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