

Coriander room
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Assessing learning output on a soft skills experiential learning module

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The Centre for Future-ready Graduates (CFG) pioneered a 12-week intensive, experiential module in January 2016 with the aim of providing training that would equip students of the National University of Singapore (NUS) with soft skills and healthy mindsets that NUS employers deem essential for success at the workplace. “Roots & Wings” is NUS’ effort to bridge the gap between the expectations of industry and our graduates’ readiness for their careers, by helping them cultivate workplace readiness tools needed to thrive and succeed in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Some of the topics covered include “Focus & Attention”, “Empathic Communication”, “Collaboration”, and “Resilience”.

The module CFG1020 “Roots & Wings (Personal and Interpersonal Effectiveness)”, a weekly tutorial group format run in groups of 30 students each, ran for 4 successful semesters and received positive ratings from students, semester on semester. The key ingredients for success included the unique teaching philosophy, pedagogical approach, experiential classroom activities, instructor-facilitated processes (e.g., deepening self-awareness), and peer accountability in buddy groups. The module adopted an experiential learning and guided discovery method by intensive hands-on practice in and out of the classroom, and reflective approaches drawn from individual and group psychological therapy.

Assessments of learning output included traditional e-quizzes to evaluate students’ understanding of key theoretical concepts. However, in order to assess for application of learning, transfer of knowledge, and integration of soft skills, other innovative and experiential approaches were used. First, weekly reflective journaling was used to assess for understanding of concepts, insights gained from the session, and evidence of trying out the methods taught in-between classes in students’ day-to-day lives. This ensured that learning was extended beyond the classroom in a practical and applicable way. Instructors logged in weekly to comment on students’ entries, provide clarification and illuminate further understanding about the concepts, correct or reinforce efforts of practice, and provide encouragement to apply their learning beyond the classroom. This feedback loop ensured that students were made accountable for their own progress, had the courage to step outside of their comfort zones, and got feedback on whether their understanding and application was effective or not.

Other assessments in CFG1020 included a Capstone Group Project of which the content and deliverables were geared towards a “co-creation” model of the curriculum with students. For example, the first iteration of the Capstone Group Project was for students to develop content for a mock class on a topic to be included in the following semester, or expand on one of the existing Roots & Wings themes, e.g. “Empathy”. In the subsequent 2 semesters, the focus of the capstone was changed to allow students to propose solutions as to how the NUS ecosystem can better support social-emotional learning through the physical ecosystem e.g., no Wi-Fi Zones to promote focus and attentive work, or the digital ecosystem e.g., building a ‘Happiness’ app for mobile platforms.

During the individual project, students were required to “teach back” at least two of the Roots & Wings skills that they had learnt in the module to a group of students who did not read CFG1020. They had to video record themselves conducting the “teaching session” and include a written self-reflection after the session. This project assessed whether they had integrated the knowledge by being able to competently convey learning points to their peers. Additionally, by cultivating a habit of reflecting on their efforts and what they learnt from the whole experience, students initiated a meta-cognitive process of reflection that they could harness for other learning experiences or modules. The individual project had a secondary but beneficial by-product, in that the wider student community became more educated of social-emotional concepts and the application of soft skills to their day-to-day lives.

This PechaKucha presentation will bring participants through some of the unique ways to assess for learning output on an academic module taught in a non-traditional way, and will provide relevant examples from student work to illustrate the instructional approach.

Keywords

Soft skills, pedagogy, learning output, assessment, experiential learning