

CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS: THE CINDERELLA OF SOFT SKILLS IN INDIAN ENGINEERING COLLEGES

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This modest attempt does not claim to be discussing anything unknown to the teachers involved in the profession of teaching English. On the contrary, it takes the subject under discussion as something well known, but often taken for granted uncritically, or not appreciated to the extent it deserves. Let's start with the preliminary discussion of the status of English in Indian Engineering colleges.

The Demand for English in Engineering Colleges

It is an elating piece of information for many members of the English faculty, to know that they are among the most sought-after employees in the engineering colleges in India now. Earlier, they are treated veritably as the second citizens, vis-à-vis their technical counter parts among the faculty members. The fact that the software boom is mainly responsible for this paradigm shift in engineering education is no more a matter of special knowledge. Interestingly enough, though English is a regular subject in the first year along with the other curriculum subjects, it is not the demand for teaching this subject that is responsible for the surge in the demand for English teachers. In the recent years, a neologism found its place in the career related vocabulary of the engineering institutions, and soon became the watchword and then elevated to the rank of a buzz word i.e., "Soft Skills." It is quite common now, in the engineering colleges—either private or government—to have some kind of institutional mechanism to train their students in soft skills. Usually, in many of the technological institutions, the first year subject of English is taught by the low paid, relatively inexperienced faculty members of English; whereas the senior, high paid faculty members are kept busy dealing with Soft Skills.

The Reasons for the Growing Significance of Soft Skills

In a nutshell, soft skills has a lot to do with the abilities of people that enable them to communicate successfully and thus to contribute to the natural work flow in the software projects. *Wikipedia*, the most popular web based encyclopedia defines soft skills as "... a cluster of productive personality traits that characterize one's relationships in

a milieu. These skills can include social graces, communication abilities, language skills, personal habits, cognitive or emotional empathy, time management, teamwork and leadership traits." In the most coveted software companies, managers are looking for people's ability to communicate clearly and openly, and to listen and respond empathetically. They also want them to have well-honed written skills so that their correspondence (including emails) doesn't hinder the progress of work. The same applies to face-to-face communication as well, without which no team work can be successful. For the people in the software industry, it is axiomatic to say that communication is indispensable for the smooth running of the business. Thus, the emphasis on soft skills is inextricably interwoven with the needs of the software industry. As education in general and technical education in particular has become increasingly career-oriented in the recent years, a kind of consensus has developed about the importance of communication skills, and soft skills.

Some Hard Facts about Soft Skills

Notwithstanding the repeated assertions that the soft skills are essential for everybody whatever walk of life they belong to, the version of soft skills as they are taught in these market-driven institutions is glaringly lopsided. As a result, the highest intellectual skills of human beings, namely critical thinking skills are either completely ignored or grossly underrated or tacitly discouraged. The emphasis on listening skills is a case in point.

It is often stressed that listening skills should not be taken for granted and one should listen in an active way and should do his/her best to keep the speaker engaged. In the real life—at least in the important matters—people listen not only actively but critically. Even when one goes to the grocery, the words of the grocer are never taken at the face value. A constant intellectual process of deciphering the real interests and motives behind the words of the grocer activates in the mind of the customer. These are what we call the critical thinking skills that occupy the most prominent place in our real life.

Hence, as M. Neil Browne and Stuart M. Keeley say, in their *Guide to Critical Thinking*: "Critical thinking is initially a process of reaction. Someone has strung together a conclusion and some reasons that allegedly make the case for the conclusion. Our task is to decide whether the argument is one we wish to make our own. So any reasoning provides raw material for critical-thinking practice." From the moment one enters an institution seeking job, one cannot succeed without such skills. But, still the very phrase "critical thinking" is conspicuous by its absence in the version of soft skills that is usually prevalent now in our engineering institutions.

These crucial skills are never given the prominence that they deserve among the set of other soft skills. Even after entering a job, it is a commonly known fact that employees organize themselves into trade unions to negotiate their rights in a concerted way. But a trade union in the software scenario sounds like an oxymoron, to say the least. Here, I suspect, lies the crux of the matter. A well-considered inculcation of the critical thinking

skills may sometimes run against the interests of the corporate business. Still for the students, they are indispensable, because crucial thinking skills also form a core constituent of what we call life skills. The recent suicides of software employees in the face of even a moderate recession, speaks volumes about the need for life skills among them. Without critical thinking skills, no one can become a good leader; as the popular book *Discovering Life Skills*, (107) says: "A good leader thinks critically and creatively, and knows how to make and carry out plans. It is not always easy to learn these skills."

The Socio-Historical Backdrop

In spite of the prevalent euphoria surrounding software and soft skills, the fact could not be ignored that from its very inception in the 1835 Macaulay Minutes, English education has run parallel to the employee needs of the imperial powers. The New Economic Policy that emerged in the wake of 1990s gave a new lease of life to the influence of mainly US based imperial business needs. The fact that Indian economy as such, and a section of people in India has profited from this, is obvious and almost incontrovertible.

But this does not disprove the fact seen on the other side of the coin, that these soft skills in the employees are needed not because their employers are interested in the intellectual or emotional growth of their employees but because they are absolutely essential for their business needs and they are only interested up to that extent only. The plight of the software engineers in the recent days of economic recession is aggravated by the confusion that results from the lack of understanding of socio-economic realities. Though economic depressions are well known to people in humanities like the students of sociology or economics; for the software engineers, it remained something beyond their wildest dreams. This unpreparedness has pitifully exacerbated the catastrophe in the context of software collapse.

On the other hand, the teachers of English— who form the majority of Soft skills teachers—are facing a different kind of dilemma. Almost all of them have a sound backing in English literature and they are also exposed to a good dose of various theories in different areas of studies in humanities, like psychological and linguistic theories, as a part of what they call "theory." Transplanted as they are into alien technological territories called the engineering colleges, they find this learning, at best unrewarding and cumbersome at the worst. Those who keep their interest in literature alive, against the grain, could do that only at the risk of appearing little more than idiosyncratic.

What is the Way Out?

Unlike most of the articles that explore a problem and shrewdly do not risk offering a solution, this article ventures a solution, even though it may sound ridiculous. The two seemingly contradictory dilemmas faced by the software engineers on the one hand and the English teachers on the other hand have a complementary character that may not be evident on the first sight. English teachers with their sound backing in literature

and a deeper understanding of social realities and social issues have exactly the same sort of knowledge that could answer the deficiencies of soft skills as they are taught now. Instead of suppressing their literary sensibilities into a dormant state unwillingly, they can put them to sensible purpose if they use that knowledge to develop the social critical skills as the most neglected realm of soft skills. For this, nobody else is more qualified than them. Using literature to develop the critical skills of the students could be an idea for instance. This can also contribute to the revival of literature in the modern times, besides establishing its utility—a utility that is not always obvious—beyond doubt. Peggy Klaus rightly complains (2) in his book, remarkably titled *Hard Truth about Soft Skills*:

Soft skills still suffer from a fundamental lack of respect. After all, how could anything described as soft be valued in the hard-charging, results-driven business world or impact the bottom line? Soft skills are generally viewed as 'nice to have'—maybe even something you are just born with—but not critical for success. The incorporation of critical skills as explained in the above lines will, I believe, enhance the relevance of soft skills in the world of hard realities.

How are Critical Thinking Skills Useful for the Technical Students?

The inclusion of critical thinking skills among other soft skills will have a salutary effect not only for the comprehensiveness of the educational curriculum but for the all-round development of the students. I will hint at some of them here:

- They will contribute towards sensitizing the social awareness and emotional intelligence of the technical students. This enhances their better integration with the rest of the society and eventually their getting rid of the supra-societal illusion that most of them nourished in the hay days of software boom.
- They will have a realistic self-consciousness of their position in the society and they will be better equipped to face the vagaries of fortune, as most of them are facing now, although in a moderate measure.
- With their awakened social sensibilities, instead of becoming sophisticated devices in the corporate business world, they will have relatively comprehensive personalities and lives—after all, is there any greater, conceivable goal for any system of education?

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