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FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH REPORT

Spain

S4B PROJECT - DIGITAL SOFT SKILLS FOR BLENDED LEARNING

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Introduction

Following the Focus Group Guide, Seneca School organised a focus group at Córdoba, Spain in online mode. The focus group was dedicated to the teachers of the above mentioned educational institution. In addition to the participants, there was a moderator, external to the group, who led the discussion, according to the Focus Group Guide.

The aim of this Focus Group was to obtain information on the skills that teachers need to improve their professional competences and support their students in distance learning. Previously, a questionnaire on soft digital skills for blended training in Spain was carried out, which were selected by the teachers. The main findings produced in this analysis will serve to delimit the selection of the 12 skills resulting from this focus group.

Methodology and participants profile

Instrument development and implementation

The focus group was conducted through the Google Meet platform. First of all, the focus group started with opening questions, focusing on a first approach between participants and moderators. Participants were asked about their name, area of work and where they would go on holiday with unlimited money (to break the ice).

After that the discussion began with open transitional questions. These served to contextualize the members of the focus group into the topic and gauge knowledge of and their involvement with distance education. The topic of these questions were to evaluate teacher's digital skills to manage an effective learning process.

The next set of questions was intended to elicit key answers on the skills most needed by teachers in distance education, asking questions related to the type of impact of distance education on teachers' educational methodology. Finally, closing questions were asked about teachers' relationships with students and their emotional state, in order to check the evolution compared to previous years.

Throughout the focus group, the most important skills for teachers in online teaching were unpacked. In this line, conclusions are presented on the need for soft skills as part of teachers' resources. The means change but all the skills that a person possesses are put on trial. They have not been taken into account for a long time, and they are very important and necessary to complement the hard skills. Especially in digital education, the loss of empathy has been highlighted, so these skills of empathising and socialising are particularly necessary.

In order to determine which are the soft skills most needed by teachers in digital education, different questions have been asked to introduce the topic, unpacking these skills and creating debates that have emerged throughout the focus group.



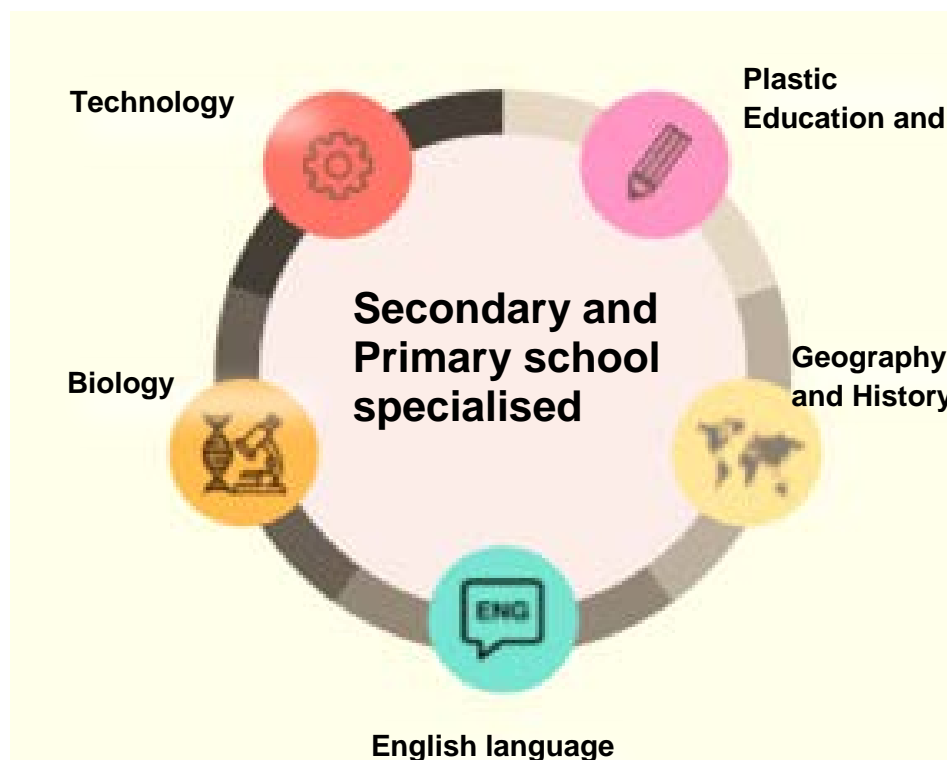
Focus group details

This focus group was held online in Cordoba on 9 March 2022. The application used to maintain communication between members throughout the focus group was Google meet. It started at 18:30. The total duration of the discussions was one hour and fifteen minutes. The session was in Spanish. At the beginning of the discussion, it was agreed among all parties to record this focus group. Two recordings were made of this content. The computer recorder was the application used for this. This allowed to create a content in mp3 format, and in mp4 format.

Participants' profile

This focus group involved 8 teachers secondary and primary school specialised in different areas (Figure 1). It was composed by 3 men and 5 women. They were selected as experts in their field dealing with digital education in everyday use in many areas.

Figure 1. Focus group experts' area of specialisation





Discussion results

The focus group began with personal questions to break the ice. The following questions were asked:

- Please share with us your name and professional area in teaching profession.*
- If you had a limitless budget, where would you vacation?*

After that, the discussion began with transitional questions. These served to contextualize the members of the focus group into the topic and gauge knowledge of and their involvement with distance education. Questions were:

- Do you find it difficult or easy to use distance learning technology?*

As a result of this question, a new focus of discussion emerged. It is not so much the teacher's difficulty in teaching distance learning classes as the barriers they present to the students. It encompassed the issue of lack of resources on the part of the student body, which was a major barrier for teachers in this education system. This implies that within the skills of teachers in distance education teaching, inequality of resources and opportunities as a recurring issue. On the other hand, there is another barrier to be taken into account: the lack of knowledge on the part of the students to use the academic resources of distance education.

- Do you consider your digital skills sufficient to manage an effective learning process?*

The general and common answer was yes. The experts explained that it was a learning process and with the pandemic their capacities to manage today's digital learning were boosted.

- When you hear "soft skills", what is the first thing that comes to your mind? What about "soft digital skills"?*

Focus group members associated soft skills with communication skills, leadership, teamwork, empathy, flexibility. These skills are needed nowadays. These are skills that are necessary for future employment, but which are taken for granted as innate abilities and are not worked on. And digital soft skills as those that apply to the digital environment. They considered empathy to be more necessary in this environment, as the discussion was linked to the teachers' concern about the difficulties of connecting and maintaining the students' attention during the whole class in digital teaching.

- Do you remember the first time you had to manage an online learning process? What was your first impression? How did you feel: scared, confused, challenged, motivated, excited...? What was the first step you put into practice to organise your classes?*

The teacher prepares the digital resources beforehand, and the students use their own resources, demonstrating their skills in order to respond to digital teaching. They also stressed the importance of organising classes according to the age of the pupils, since depending on the academic year, their abilities differ greatly in the use of technology.



All the teachers at the school use the same platform to share resources with the students, including those who cannot attend classes. It is a tool that facilitates the students' understanding of the subject, allowing the teaching staff to provide more resources to the students.

In the second part of the focus group, the key questions were asked:

- What effect does the current learning/teaching model have on your well-being, confidence and productivity as a teacher?

There is a double dimension. Digital learning has brought learners closer to a context that previously seemed more distant. In the case of languages, access to a different vocabulary has allowed students to see learning as a closer reality. Moreover, teachers can make use of digital tools to improve the quality of their teaching. However, the downside is that the wide range of tools, information and possibilities offered by digital teaching through the internet can raise issues that were not foreseen. In this sense, the dispersion of students, the selection of the most appropriate tools among a wide variety of possibilities, fake news, etc., have to be faced.

- To what extent are you confident that you can provide effective instruction and support in the current teaching model?

In relation to the previous answer, it was concluded that e-learning should be complementary and not a substitute for face-to-face teaching, as it is a very useful tool that has allowed students to get closer to a reality that previously seemed more distant through access to information and tools without time or distance barriers. However, there are barriers that increase the workload for teachers.

- Over the past few months, did your ability to teach grow in any way?

Since the pandemic, the use of technology as a work tool has increased. This has generated a learning process in the teachers themselves, who have learned and deepened their knowledge in the use of platforms and applications.

- What kind of skills (hard or soft) do you think teachers need to improve their professional competences and support their students in distance teaching?

In response, the focus group participants pointed out the importance of maintaining a balance of soft and hard skills. Specifically, when emphasis was placed on soft skills, it was concluded that each subject taught tends to require some skills more than others. The moderator asked about some specific examples or cases. Examples emerged that pointed out that the soft skill of "teamwork" created difficulties during digital teaching, thus there were problems in coordination and cooperation in distance education.

The moderator asked about the order of importance of the skills for teachers. The experts argued that it was important to strengthen those skills in which one is less strong, and to capitalise on strengths.

The moderator asked about the skills that could be better reached or perceived by the students.



Here the experts showed the importance that one cannot generalise about the perception of learners, as everyone is different. However, they highlighted motivation as a key skill.

Finally, closing questions were asked:

- Compared to previous years, how much more difficult or easier is it to build relationships with your students at the moment?

It was commented that relationships with students persist, but compared to face-to-face classes, relationships with students are not maintained to the same extent. Face-to-face teaching brings you closer to the student and makes you connect more with them. Relationships in the digital environment can favour the accessibility of content (class recordings, video calls for tutorials, etc.).

In more detail, they pointed out cases in which on days when students attended classes in a non-face-to-face manner, they required a brief summary or catch-up in the next day's class.

- To what extent are you concerned about the socio-emotional well-being of your students at the moment?

Teachers in the focus group conveyed some concern about students' readiness to follow online classes.

In this regard, parents were a key point in support of this idea, as they also communicated to the teachers the concern that their children were not sufficiently prepared to follow this mode of teaching. In this vein, the discussion opened a door to the diversity of the student body, as some students have shown insufficient ability to manage time and productivity on platforms, apps, screen time, etc. and these issues affect stress levels.

- What kind of activities do you consider necessary and appropriate to support your work in effectively managing the digital learning process? improve communication between students and teachers and increase students' motivation and academic achievement?

Class materials, as essential tools of the subject, are provided on the platforms, so that students always have access to this content, which facilitates the learning of the subject in a delocalised and complementary way to their material (notes, textbooks, etc.).

In addition, the connections with the teacher via email or other digital platforms gives the student the security. On the one hand, they are aware that they are being attended to and, on the other hand, they are confident that the teacher's response and their doubts can be resolved. This generates more communication between teacher and student.

Conclusion

This was a very enriching focus group. It brought up issues beyond those raised. The contributions have been very constructive and relevant in the choice of the most necessary skills for teaching digit. Especially from the contextual importance given to soft skills, the focus group came to several conclusions among which were: the difficulties to deal with in digital



education, the importance of soft skills in the current context, the relationships between students and teachers.

The focus group followed a common thread that opened a debate that connected these themes.

At this point, teachers expressed a major concern about the disconnection with students during the teaching process in the digital environment. On this issue it was concluded that soft skills were key tools, and as such, should be enhanced by raising their relevance in the classroom as they are fundamental to overcome the barrier mentioned above.

Another front for teachers was to deal with possible problems in the digital environment. This includes technical problems (bugs in software, platforms, wifi connection, etc.) problems of inequalities (not all students have the resources to carry out the digital education provided by teachers) problems of skills (insufficient knowledge of students in certain platforms or tools needed during the subject being taught).

It was also concluded that each subject may require more of a particular soft skill than another, as the needs of the subject itself may develop the use of one skill more. This does not mean neglecting the others, but changing the order of importance to suit the specific and productive subject teaching modality.

From the 20 digital soft skills selected in the pre-focus group questionnaire (figure 2), 12 were selected (figure 3).

Figure 2. 20 Soft skills selected in the pre-focus group questionnaire

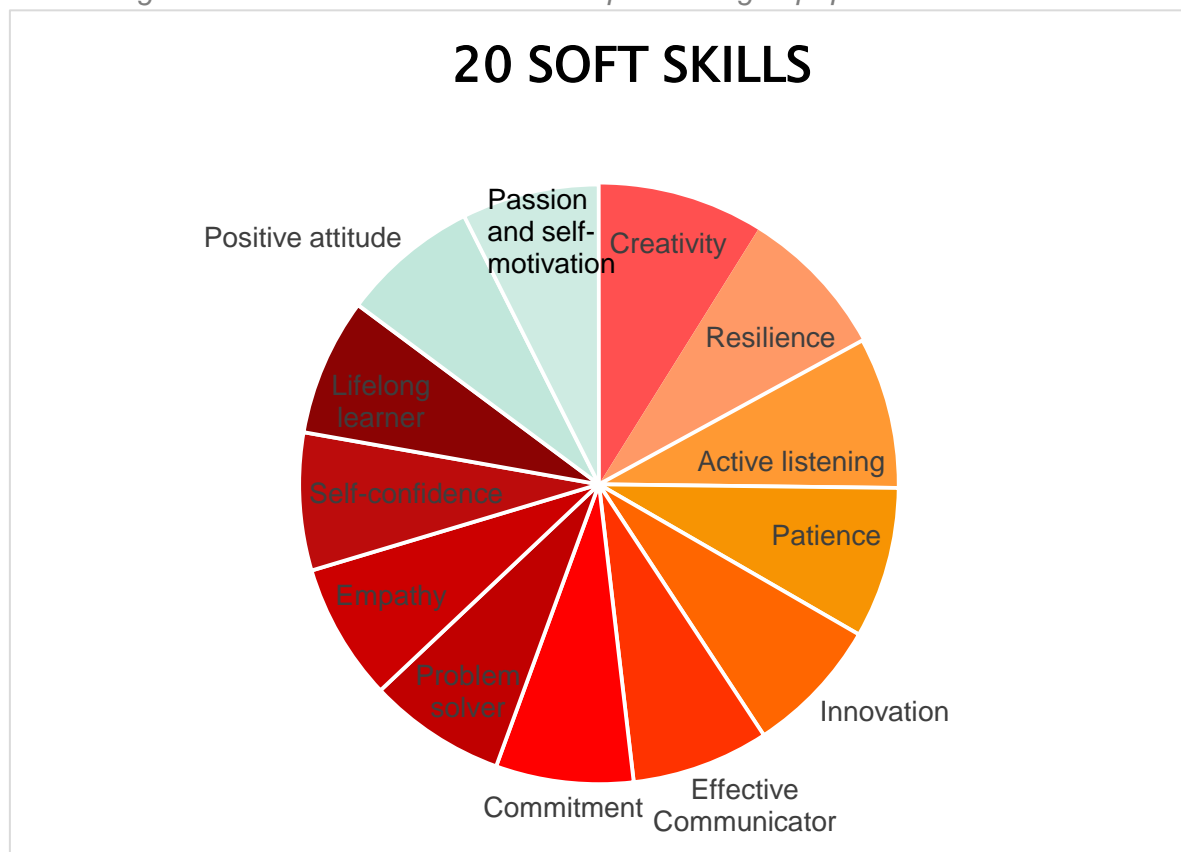
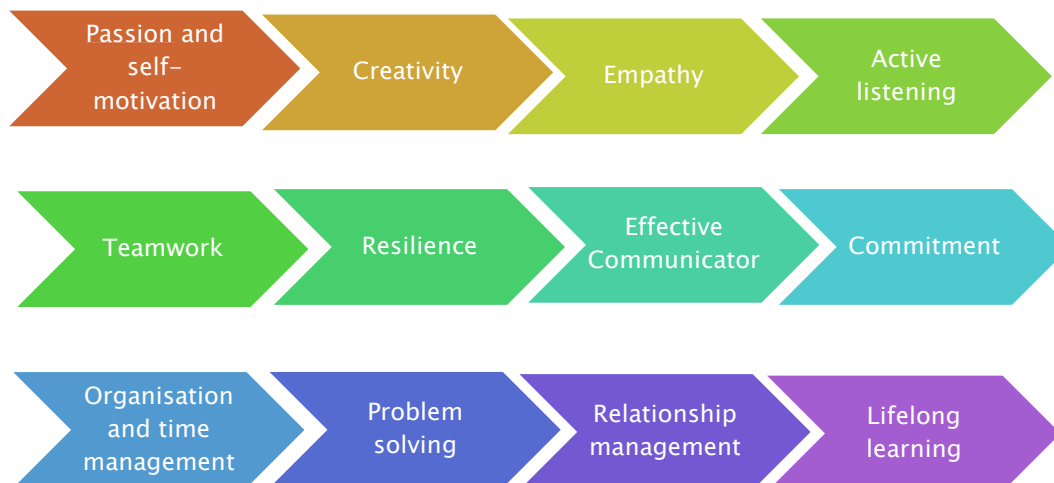


Figure 3. 12 soft skills resulting from the focus group



Recommendations

It is important to create an environment in which pupils are digitally literate and feel integrated throughout the lesson. However, special attention should be paid to the focus between the teacher's relationships with the students. Technologies may change depending on the subjects or activities taught in the classroom, but the emotions, sensations and feelings of the students should encourage a disconnection between the students and the teacher. This has highlighted the importance of strengthening the connection with the students. This relationship is not only present in class hours, but rather the digital environment is extended and interpreted as a permanent communication between teacher-student through platforms, e-mails, etc., making it a very favourable environment in terms of accessibility to content and means of communication with the teaching staff. However, despite these facilities that seem to establish a permanent connection with the content of the classes and between teacher-student, there is a major barrier, which is the difficulty for the student to maintain attention throughout the lesson at a distance.