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Soft skills assessment and enhancement: A call for contextualisation

Mauro Giacomazzi

Luigi Giussani Institute of Higher Education

We are living in a world in which many cultures coexist. This requires a shared effort and the common goal to co-construct a society where individual differences are an added value for the whole of humanity (Mignolo & Escobar, 2013; Odrowąż-Coates, 2017). While globalisation offers great economic development opportunities, it still perpetuates further norms and values that are sometimes disrespectful of the local tradition (Ashenfelter et al., 2018; Hughes, 1994; Mittelman, 2017). If we believe this assumption is valid, it becomes necessary to explore a critical evaluation of the implications of the utilisation of western constructs, theories, or methods in different contexts and at various locations.

Even in the field of soft skills enhancement and assessment, inclusivity should be promoted by fostering practices that recognise the unity of human experience by seeking synergies among the global and local contexts (Olson & Peacock, 2012). The construction of new knowledge through more respectful engagement with a plurality of cultural systems may foster the creation of a bottom-up process of generalisation of new theories and practices that is more inclusive (Ekuma, 2019; Mittelman, 2017; Shizha & Makuvaza, 2017).

From the cognitive sciences, we know that the development of individuals occurs in the process of their participation in the life of their cultural communities. Culture is the set of all the beliefs, behavioural patterns, and knowledge that collectively and normatively regulate people's way of life in their communities (Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Rogoff et al., 2018). Culture affects cognitive development by shaping people's views of the world and the way they interact with it. Adults in a society pass to children the cognitive tools that help them interpret, experience, and face problems. While interacting with family or community members, children are introduced to the various cultural practices and contribute to their development and modifications (Bronfenbrenner, 2013). Vygotsky (1978) emphasised how children internalise what is external to them, but the theorists of the participation view (Rogoff et al., 2018) see this framework as too limited; the person and the cultural context are intertwined, mutually cooperating in the constitution of the various aspects of life (Rogoff, 1990, 2003). According to Rogoff (2003), child development is the process of growth that happens while participating in the community; it is a transformation process through participation. That is why she argues that cognitive development can only be understood in the light of cultural practices, as cognitive functions develop differently depending on cultural circumstances. She also asserts that cultural practices

change over time and that individuals are often concurrent members of multiple cultural groups, meaning that cognitive development can never be assumed to progress in a similar way across—or even within—cultures.

Rogoff (1990) highlights a myriad of cultural practices that can influence cognitive development, including the relative importance of independence versus interdependence—or cooperation versus competition—within a society and the norms surrounding discipline and child-rearing. From her perspective, the person participating in events is not external to them. In this way, individuals establish a relationship of interdependence with the external world since they transform and are transformed by external events. This goes far beyond a mere process of bringing something that is outside the person to the inside. In this perspective, cognitive development cannot be detached from the cultural aspects that become essential to understanding children's experiences; understanding people requires a mutually constitutive approach to understanding the culture (Rogoff et al., 2018).

Rogoff (2003) concludes that cultural processes are of crucial importance in human development. She argues that cognitive development not only involves skills and knowledge at an individual level but also it is a collective and collaborative endeavour involving other people who are part of the person's immediate environment. She describes learning as a process of guided participation shared by the child and other adults in the community. Cross-cultural psychologists have observed differences between cultures in terms of the willingness of students to distinguish themselves from others (Philips, 1992), the interpretations of problems that need to be solved and the proper methods for solving them (Goodnow et al., 1976), and the definition of what constitutes intelligence (Wober, 1972).

Education being a cultural process, it is likely that fostering cognitive skills through education differs between cultures. In this, the fundamental role in the discovery, use, and teaching of soft skills is played by language, which is indeed one of the fundamental means of communicating culture (Duranti, 1997; Luriiia, 1976; Ong, 1982).

Starting from this, it should be crucial to investigate and question how enhancement and assessment of soft skills in the non-western world are designed for appropriate contextualisation and cultural sensitivity. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, several authors (Grosser & Lombard, 2008; Madondo, 2018; Schendel, 2016), have highlighted the importance of starting from the local understanding of a skill for developing and measuring it through relevant and context-sensitive strategies. Nevertheless, only a few studies have investigated the local understanding of these skills before assessing them, and they have not served to deepen appreciation of the influence of cultural differences (Giacomazzi et al., 2022). The lack of attention to the local interpretation of what needs to be assessed and how it relates to culture and language results in the acquisition of assessment tools and pedagogical strategies that do not consider the cultural nuances (Giacomazzi et al., 2022). Most of the attempts of empirical studies to assess soft skills in medium- and low-income contexts relied solely on assessment instruments imported from other cultural contexts (Schendel & Tolmie, 2017), generating problems of comparability, an absence of normative groups and a lack of familiarity in adaptation and validation processes.

All in all, I believe that the process of globalisation—though unavoidable—should be built on modalities that promote intercultural competency (Deardorff, 2006) through inclusive dialogue, a plurality of epistemological beliefs and worldviews, and sensitivity to specific contexts (Assié-Lumumba, 2016; Lee, 2017).

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