Chapter XII

Using Mobile Technology and Podcasts to Teach Soft Skills

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ABSTRACT

Training ESL students in soft skills and employability skills with the help of Web 2.0 technologies is the current trend in Indian educational institutions. Students, who aspire to grow to greater heights in the corporate world, have understood the importance of learning soft skills such as verbal and non-verbal communication as well as employability skills such as interpersonal, problem solving and organizational skills to secure placements in leading companies. To meet these demands, teachers are required to play the role of facilitators of learning, and use innovative training methods. They no longer depend totally on textual materials but use advanced technological tools to supplement their teaching. The curriculum is designed to accommodate these innovations. Thus one finds more and more teachers using Web 2.0 technologies like podcasts, mobile phones, Wikis, blogs and Skype. Research studies conducted on the use of these Web 2.0 technology tools have shown the possibility of creating a virtual classroom and promoting students’ participatory learning in a more effective manner.

INTRODUCTION

With the growing competition in the industrial field, most of the leading companies in India expect their employees to be well trained in management skills like marketing, leadership, decision making, persuasion and negotiation skills. More and more youngsters get trained in the above-mentioned skills before and after their entry into the corporate world. In most of the Indian educational institutions, training is offered at the collegiate level itself and it is now mandatory for every engineering student to master soft skills and employability skills to get selected in campus interviews. They are normally conducted in the final year of study by leading industrial houses. One has to be proficient in soft skills, i.e. verbal and non-verbal communication, to transact with
local and overseas customers and to procure new business for the company. Needless to say, these skills refer to students’ use of appropriate business vocabulary and expressions. The acquisition of these skills paves the way for using different employability skills like interpersonal and analytical skills, interview and discussion skills and etiquettes. When one masters these employability skills, students may easily learn managerial skills.

What are employability skills? Saterfiel (1995) quotes Lankard (1990) to define the term “employability skills,” as those skills used to “describe the preparation or foundational skills upon which a person must build job-specific skills (i.e., those that are unique to specific jobs). Among these foundational skills are those which relate to communication, personal and interpersonal relationships, problem solving, and management of organizational processes” (para. 2). We can also include interview and discussion skills in the above list. It is obvious that these employability skills could be mastered only if students possess soft skills. Nieragden (2000) defines soft skills in his article, “The Soft Skills of Business English,” as “those personal values and interpersonal skills that determine a person’s ability to fit into a particular structure, such as a project team, a rock group, or a company. The skills include personality traits like emotional maturity, eagerness to learn, and willingness to share and embrace new ideas” (para. 2). Students have to be taught these soft skills separately in order to make them use employability skills. These form part of management training given in educational institutions.

Web 2.0 technologies can be very helpful in providing effective management training. What is meant by Web 2.0 technology? Miller (2005) quotes O’Reilly to define Web 2.0 technology: “Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an ‘architecture of participation,’ and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences” (Miller, 2005, para. 5).

How does Web 2.0 technology enhance management and language learning? Any training proves effective only when it provides authentic inputs and creates an opportunity for the trainer to make use of what is learnt. In that way Web 2.0 technology tools like podcasts and mobile phones offer resources for effective listening and at the same time provide a platform for using those tools for practicing aural and oral skills. Miller (2005) in his article on “Web 2.0: Building a new library” specifies various functions of Web 2.0 technology as the one that “permits the building of virtual applications,” being “participative” and that it “works for the user” (Paul’s principles of Web 2.0, n.p.). Many researchers have shown the use of blogs, Skype, wikis, podcasts and mobile phones — the Web 2.0 technology tools that promote participatory learning and contribute to a higher level of job performance later. With the growing interest among students to listen to audio files in MP3 players and using mobile phones for listening to songs, training them in using podcasts and mobile phones for learning employability skills, with the equal focus on teaching business vocabulary and expressions is a relatively easy task for trainers. While podcasts offer plenty of scope for listening to business English expressions and vocabulary in audio format, mobile phones have a provision to record one’s own voice and listen to it, thereby monitoring one’s language delivery. One can create a podcast and then upload the audio files recorded in the mobile phones. In other words, it creates a platform for users to receive input from the web and at the same time, facilitates participation in using the software.
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