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Soft skills or digital skills: Is This the Question? Genesis of a workshop

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Demand for skills building is increasing more than ever and it has only been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Digitalisation and globalisation are the driving factors, thus requiring not only digital skills but also soft skills. New and ever-changing contexts require new and flexible training approaches. Performative teaching and learning has proven to be instrumental in helping to develop emotional and social skills, but it is best suited for face-to-face pedagogical contexts, or is it? This article will describe the elements of a workshop that aimed to train soft skills. It was inspired by an online training module in which the teachers applied a performative approach to train digital skills. The module was an integral part of an innovative, interdisciplinary, and interactive workshop, Active Learning Lab (ALL-EM), organised at Ca' Foscari University. An abridged and adapted version of this workshop was presented at the 8th Scenario Forum Sore back, square eyes? Going performative in digital teaching and learning spaces (18/19 June 2021, online).

1 Introduction

A recent survey by McKinsey (see figure below) has clearly shown that social and emotional skills are more and more in demand (McKinsey, 2021). However, this trend is not new, and companies have been investing in soft skills programmes for a long time (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2016). Higher Education, especially in the US, started paying particular attention to soft skills more than 10 years ago leading academics all over the world to follow suit and wonder how to research and apply these topics in their practice with students (La Marca & Gülbay, 2018).

Moreover, the growing need for – and interest in – soft skills was particularly high in the area of technical and digital skills as a consequence of the pandemic and the widespread lockdowns enforced in most countries all over the world (see Figure 1).

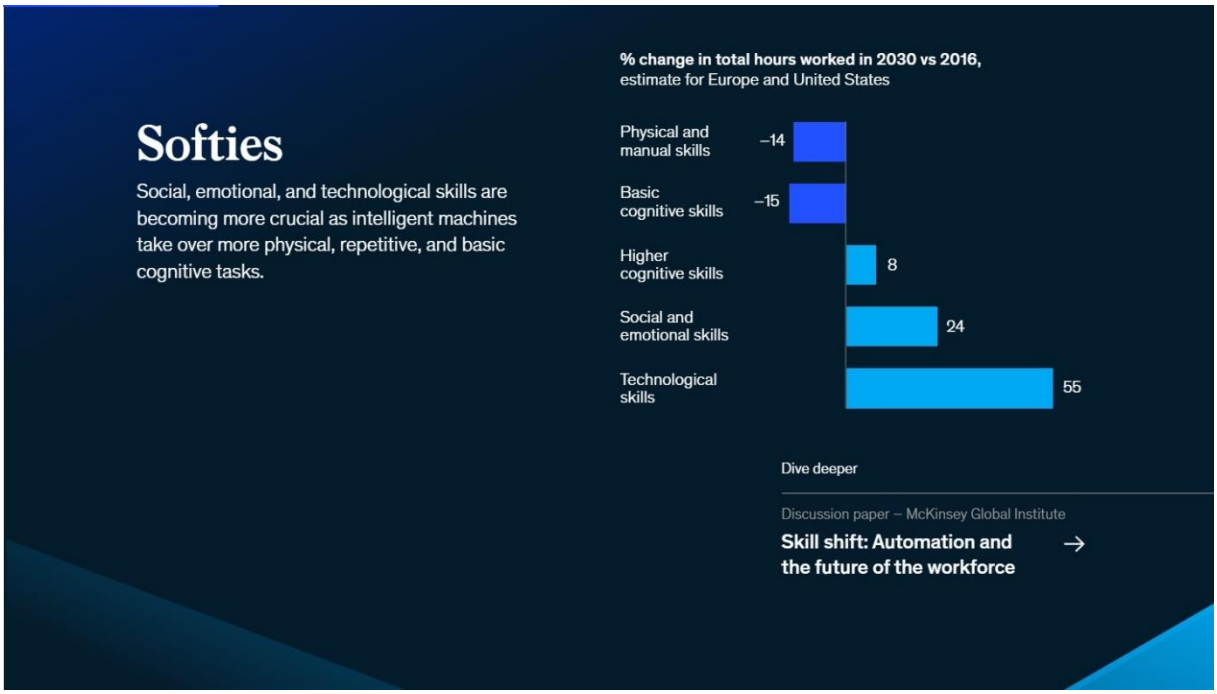


Figure 1: Soft Skills for a Hard World (McKinsey, 2021)

In Italy, Ca' Foscari University has developed several programmes dedicated to innovative and digital learning (Ca' Foscari, 2021b), amongst them *Active Learning Lab for Export Manager* (ALL-EM) is a very successful one, as shown by the large number of students applying every year (100 applications forms for 30 places in 2021) together with the growing number of external partners and companies collaborating in it. The fifth iteration of ALL-EM takes place in 2023. These short courses (titled the Lab), which are actually long structured workshops, are carried out in six to eight weeks with the goal of accompanying students and recent graduates coming from different educational backgrounds in a process of developing original projects based on real case-studies by enhancing their creativity and employability using innovative methods, such as Design Thinking, Lean Startup, Business Model Canvas.

ALL-EM is focused on internationalisation processes for Italian companies and it is designed and carried out to train students for the role of export manager, in collaboration with experts of the sector, local companies and an external partner, Seles. Every edition is usually dedicated to a different market. 2021 ALL-EM III Edition was dedicated to digital technologies for international trade. It was an obvious choice, considering the disruption caused by the pandemic and the inevitable changes to the labour market (McKinsey, 2021; Seiler, 2021). Moreover, the Lab had to be organised online, as in the academic year 2020-21 lessons were mainly carried out in a virtual environment. It offered a mix of theoretical seminars, meetings with the partner companies, and practical workshops on design thinking, soft skills and digital tools.

This article will focus on the description of the workshop-module dedicated to soft-skills carried out during the III edition of ALL-EM, *Teatro d'impresa – Team building*. It was organised from February to April 2021 on the Zoom platform, in the middle of a lockdown in Italy. It was a challenge for both the trainer and the participants. For the first time, this type of soft-skills training, using a performative approach and working on interpersonal relationships, was carried out online. It was a particularly challenging time for everyone in Italy - being apart, not being allowed to go out or meet friends and families. Moreover, this online format was totally new for trainers, organisers and participants, with the latter never having had any previous experience with performative training. Despite all those challenges, all stakeholders actively collaborated to make the Lab happen and were generally satisfied with the results, which will be discussed in the next chapters. The following questions arose:

- Is soft skills training with a performative method possible in the virtual environment?
- Can it be used as a way to train digital skills?

In order to further explore those questions and to share their reflections with other practitioners, the trainer developed a second workshop and presented it at the *8th Scenario Forum* Symposium entitled *Sore Back, Square Eyes? Going Performative in Digital Teaching and Learning Spaces* in June 2021. It attempted to find an answer to those questions while presenting the design and content of the original workshop. It was an occasion to reflect with colleagues on the questions above. Both workshops were carried out by the author, who acted as the trainer and the observer. However, the comments and reflections gathered here are not only the result of the trainer's observations and notes, but also of the participants' and the tutors' feedback during the lessons.

2 Literature review

The original workshop, *Teatro d'impresa – Team building*, focused on soft skills by adopting a performative approach based on the principles of improvisation theatre, in particular Keith Johnstone (2015). However, the events following the COVID-19 pandemic forced all interaction, teaching and learning, and training activities online for months. That is why digital skills played a new, fundamental role in the context of the Active Learning Lab ALL EM III Edition. The literature review will therefore touch upon the three different areas of interest touched upon in this workshop: soft skills, digital skills and performative training.

2.1 Soft skills

A complete list of soft skills is very hard to make, it depends on the context, target and subject (workplace, higher education, academia). However, all the literature reviewed in this article

lists similar 'core' skills: problem-solving, decision-making, creative and critical thinking, teamwork, communication skills, leadership, conflict management, active listening, emotional intelligence, empathy, and adaptability, among others.

Defining soft skills is not easy, their precise origin is not clear, but it seems to date back as far as the 70s, when a survey by the US Army defined them as "skills that involve little or no interaction with machine and can be applied in a variety of job contexts" (Fry & Whitemore in Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2016: 155). Starting from the 90s the World Health Organisation (WHO) identified some life skills: decision-making, problem-solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, coping with emotions and with stress (Cornalli, 2018). Other classifications were proposed by the European Union (*Key Competences for Lifelong Learning 2006*, *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*) and the OECD, relating to personal and social life, social interaction, autonomous acting, and the use of tools, respectively. The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) made popular by Daniel Goleman's bestseller *Emotional Intelligence. Why it can matter more than IQ* published in 1995, completely changed the perspective in the evaluation of performance at work – and in life, more in general – emphasising the major role played by self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.

Charoensap-Kelly et al. (2016) in their overview of the definitions of soft skills sum them all up as "abstract personal or interpersonal qualities necessary for acquiring and excelling in a job" (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2016, p. 155). Ibrahim et al. (2017) adopt another definition (core skills, key competencies and personal skills) and highlight their importance in today's dynamic and competitive business world pointing out that nowadays "hard skills are considered less important in relation to employability and performance" (Ibrahim et al., 2017, p. 389). After a thorough literature review, they agree with Rugarcia and vouch for the need for higher education institutes to address "the acquisition of these skills and provide the technology to support them" (Ibrahim et al., 2017, p. 392). La Marca and Gülbay (2018) analyse students' difficulties in developing projects and making life choices thus challenging higher education institutes to promote personal skills that integrate hard skills as required by the labour market. They argue for a training methodology which places the students at the centre and promotes metacognitive learning strategies. Similarly, Cornalli (2018) encourages the need for a holistic, learner-centred and problem-based approach.

The number of skills that are necessary for an export manager is huge, and it would have been impossible to train them all at the same time in the 8-hour-module dedicated to soft skills which will be described in the following section. That is why, a selection was made focusing on the following as the main ones to be trained: teamwork, communication skills, creativity,

and active listening. However, the performative approach used to train them may have been working on many others at some subconscious level.

2.2 Digital skills

Digital literacy refers to a complex set of different skills required to achieve digital competence (Eurostat, 2019) which is a prerequisite in today's world (McKinsey, 2021). DigComp (2019) identified five areas in the key components of digital competence: information and digital literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, and safety and problem-solving. DigComp further articulates them into more detailed descriptions encompassing evaluation, organisation and management of sources and data, participation and self-empowerment, cultural awareness and adaptation strategies, copyright and licensing, safety and security (with reference to well-being, environmental impact and privacy), evaluation and selection of digital tools and many more. La Marca & Gülbay (2018, p. 178) started from the framework developed by ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education) and identified three specific competencies with their respective literacy areas: *Digital information competency* (use of research tools), *operative & socio emotional digital competency* (use of research tools for communication and collaboration), and *digital reproduction competency* (use of research tools for creative production). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need to use devices and the Internet as everyday tools, but it is not only about the technical competence. As Cavalieri (2021) points out, the added value in the working performance will depend on enhancing the human side implied in our competencies.

Research shows that young people, who are often called *digital natives* (ECDL Foundation, 2014), are not advanced users and may not even be very interested in learning more. The European level of digital competence is inadequate and a survey in Italy reported very low digital security skills (ECDL Foundation, 2014). Hence the need to better define those competencies and teach them at school (ECDL Foundation, 2014) and at the university (La Marca & Gülbay, 2018).

The third edition of *ALL-EM* had a special focus on digital skills as the whole Lab was carried out online, using collaboration tools and platforms, which were selected in advance to best serve the purpose not only of working together in a virtual environment, but also taking into account the ones most likely to be used in a work environment.

Zoom was the platform used for videoconferencing (lessons, seminars and workshops), as it was the most common at that time and students were already very familiar with it. Slack[1] was

[1] For more information go to the website: https://slack.com/intl/it-it/.

used as the place for organisational matters (messages, document sharing, and storage) as it is very versatile: it allows the creation of sub-channels for specific areas of interest and dedicated teamwork and can be matched to external tools (Gdrive, Dropbox, Miro[2] and many others). So, the participants had everything in one place, organised according to topics, needs and teams. They could easily communicate without fear of missing messages or the thread of discourse. They used Canva[3], Miro and Scrum[4] for collaboration and design thinking. Students very likely also used WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and other messaging platforms to (informally) communicate among them. The use of social media was neither encouraged nor discouraged, but there was a general positive attitude towards external communication. Most participants posted on their social media all the time, using the official hashtags connected to the Lab and tagging coaches and trainers who often read and liked their posts. Compared to the previous editions, this was a much more 'social' one: an official team appointed by the university took care of the external communication on its social media to promote the innovative approach applied by the university and show and promote its role and interaction within and towards the community, the so-called 'third mission'.

2.3 Performative training and improvisation at work

Soft skills are personal skills, focusing on self-awareness and abilities to be creative, communicate, interact, manage conflicts, and so much more. That is why training cannot use the traditional methods of subject-based courses, which are also undergoing revision and require more and more methods and tools integrating these skills (for further reading see La Marca & Gülbay, 2018). For instance, La Marca and Gülbay (2018) suggest the use of flipped classroom as a tool to develop the 4Cs (creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration) together with the development of digital skills. Many different training methods can be used. This paper will focus on drama-based and performative approaches (the term is used here as an umbrella term to "describe forms of […] teaching that derive from the performative arts and their corresponding culturally specific pedagogical practices" (Schewe, 2013, p. 26).

Many authors have dealt with the benefits of using drama and theatre as tools for teaching and learning at all levels of education, from pre-school to higher education (for a very brief, historical perspective see Schewe, 2013). There are countless associations, journals,

[2] For more information go to the website: https://miro.com/login/.
[3] For more information go to the website: https://www.canva.com/it_it/.
[4] For further information go to the website: https://www.scrum.org/resources/what-is-scrum/.

publications, websites and conferences[5] spanning a whole lot of different contexts and subjects as far as primary, secondary and higher education is concerned. On the other hand, when it gets to corporate training, researchers' interest is relatively new. The use of theatre and drama for corporate training officially dates back to the 90s at least. In his paper at the 60th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Schreyögg (2001) reported on the change brought about by organisational theatre, with a focus on conflicts. Soon, interest in improvisation theatre started developing at academic level with a number of dissertations and papers being written (see for example Kudrowitz 2010 on a case-study on improvisation and creativity). In his contribution on *Forbes Leadership Forum,* Scinto (2014) points out the benefits of using improvisation theatre. Interestingly, he collects comments from the participants in courses of the New York's Magnet Theater, where corporate training sessions focus on improving communication skills by making use of the "Yes and" principle. Robson et al. (2015) illustrate what improvisation is and how it can be successfully applied to training in marketing and service. Schinko-Fischli (2019) has been successfully applying improvisation theatre to train coaches and leaders for more than 10 years. Recently, Mehta et al. (2021) and Neel et al. (2021) have illustrated and commented on dealing with improvisation and training for medical staff. The uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted more than ever the need for a way to deal with crisis without an instruction manual. In their online article for the *Harvard Business Review* Mannucci et al. (2021) wrote "you need managers and employees who can think on their feet and act fast […]. That is, you need skilled improvisers".

In Italy, Vergnani (2021a, 2021b) was among the first to speak about *teatro d'impresa* (drama-based corporate training) and organised the first national meeting in 1997, in Bologna. Roberta Pinzauti (2021) has been giving training courses by making use of theatre and art since 1999. More and more training organisations are making use of *teatro d'impresa*, and though improvisation takes a major part in that, in my experience as a trainer, the use of the term is still not so popular and is dreaded by marketing people, as potential participants are intimidated by the sole word[6]. Yet, it can be said that "improvisation happens all the time in [life]"[7], to adapt a quote from a recent *Scenario Colloquium*, (Lutzker, 2021), and it surely is

[5] Taking account of all the references would be a daunting job, which is not the purpose of this paper, however, just for the sake of mentioning a few: *Scenario Journal for Performative Teaching and Learning*, Scenario Colloquia taking place online every month in the last 3 academic years (starting from A.Y. 2020-2021), *Research in Drama Education*, *Drama Research*, IDEA, *Drama in Education Days* conferences, and so many more.

[6] All the Italian colleagues and the companies using improvisation I know confirm this cautious and suspicious attitude. It is more popular to read about traning courses using *teatro d'impresa*. Only recently and sparcely, you can read posts and blogs of trainers describing their sessions using improvisation, so there is a promising new trend emerging. For the time being *Teatro d'impresa* is much more common and is considered a very innovative training method making use of different drama techniques.

[7] The original quote used the word "class" instead of "life": improvisation happens all the time in class.

an effective method being – consciously or unconsciously – used in teaching and training. The use of an adequate terminology, such as 'performative', as suggested by Schewe (2020) in an academic context, may change things, but this term is still not popular enough in Italy and *teatro d'impresa* is the preferred term.

Improvisation fosters listening, quick thinking and spontaneity, it helps build relationships (Erickson, 2015, Mannucci et al., 2021). Applied improvisation uses

> the principles, tools, practices, skills and mind-sets developed in comedy, jazz and theatre and utilizes them for non-theatrical or performance purposes. Participants […] are able to integrate these principles into their daily lives. Personal development, team building, creativity, innovation and wellbeing are some of thei[r] areas that benefit from learning applied improvisation methods. (Schinko-Fischli, 2019, p. 10).

Its main principles are attention and contact, nonverbal communication, co-creation, spontaneity and intuition, and error culture and trust (Schinko-Fischli, 2019), which are fundamental in soft skills training.

Some of the principles of improvisation which were mentioned by Tina Fey in her *Commencement Speech at Fielding* in 2008 are crucial for a successful and fulfilling working and personal life:

> Respect and acknowledge everything your partners have created and proposed;
>
> Make statements, make sure to be part of the solution;
>
> Stay in the present;
>
> There are no mistakes, but only choices.
>
> (adapted from Fey's commencement speech, 2008).

They go hand in hand with the following ones mentioned by Schinko-Fischli (2019, p. xiii):

> Accepting offers ("Yes, and…"): being open to new and unknown things;
>
> Having ideas, and letting them go again: when an idea or a dream do not come to fruition, you can remain open to what comes next;
>
> Successful failure: acknowledging that failing and making mistakes may be exactly what leads you to be where you are.

All these principles inspired the workshop, together with Keith Johnstone's (2015a) didactic approach to improvisation as a way to explore (and unlock) one's own full potential as a person.

The challenge was to move all training activities online and adapt these principles and methods to the virtual environment. In the next section you will find a short description of the workshop "Team building – Teatro d'impresa", which inspired the one presented at the *8th Scenario Forum Symposium* in 2021.

2.4 1.4 Face-to-face vs online performative teaching

For most teachers, trainers and practitioners, suddenly going online with their performative teaching was all new and unexpected, they coped by applying creativity, collaboration – probably with frustration, at times – and by caring for their students. Most reacted by attending further training courses, sharing with colleagues, and staying connected with each other (as emerged at *Drama in Education Days 2020*, *8th Scenario Forum Symposium 2021, Drama in Education Days 2021,* and all the Colloquia organised by *Scenario Forum* in 2020 and 2021).

The same applied to theatre performances and drama classes, as theatres were also closed, and events were forbidden. Some drama companies and associations improvised short workshops or performances online. It was neither easy nor perfect, but the direct and personal experience gathered from actors, colleagues and friends showed that it somehow worked (it was also confirmed in the final remarks at the *8th Scenario Forum Symposium*). The following text attempts to further explore this point by describing the training experience in two online workshops using a performative approach.

3 Teatro d'Impresa – Team Building: Genesis of a workshop

Active Learning Lab Export Manager (ALL-EM) is a wide-raging, interdisciplinary project aimed at providing university students with innovative and high-quality training, combining different abilities (digital skills, soft skill, design thinking) in project-based activities based on real-life challenges in collaboration with an external expert partner and local companies (Ca' Foscari, 2021b). It is composed of different modules (lectures, seminars, practical workshops, and meetings with the partners) distributed along six to eight weeks, with an average attendance of four hours a day (Tuesday to Thursday) adding to the time spent by the participants in planning and developing a final project. Participants are selected among the students of Ca' Foscari university who can spontaneously apply for the Lab in an open competition. The selection process usually takes place at the beginning of the second semester, 30 students are selected from different bachelor's and master's degree courses (Language and Communication, International Trade, Economics) and put into six teams, to ensure as many different backgrounds as possible in each of them. In the selection process, interviewers try to identify the main personality traits in order to take them into consideration while forming

the teams. The teams are matched to three different Italian companies presenting three different challenges (one every two teams), for them to develop a project meeting their needs and requirements.

In the winter season 2020-21, the epidemiological situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic led the Italian Government to declare a form of lockdown, closing schools and universities and moving lessons online once again. That is why the Scientific Committee organising the yearly Active Learning Lab Export Manager (ALL-EM) took up the challenge and organised its III edition around digital skills by moving all seminars and workshops online. The selection process was carried out in January 2021 by a team of researchers and administrative staff. The challenge concerned the creation of a communication plan on social media to attract new customers or open to new markets and there were three partner companies from very diverse backgrounds (tourism and travel, hospitality and construction). At the concluding event, each team presented its project to an audience, the partner companies and the expert committee (made of the members of the scientific committee of ALL-EM), who was also called upon choosing the best project. The winning team were given a grant to be spent on training (short courses, workshops or seminars) on offer at the university.

3.1 The Concept

Teatro d'impresa – Team building is one of the modules of ALL-EM. It is an 8-hour workshop focused on training soft skills with the use of a performative approach (in particular with the use of improvisation). While being planned as a whole consistent activity, this workshop is the only module organised in different, separated moments throughout the Lab: 2.5 hours at the kick-off meeting (day 1) together with the presentation of the tools to work in a team, 1.5 hour in week 1, 2 hours in week 3 and then again in week 5. The 2021 edition was originally meant to be carried out in-person, but it had to be moved online all of a sudden, without any previous experience and not much time to experiment beforehand. The module applied a performative approach from the very beginning, including at the kick-off. A final task was assigned to every team: create a (maximum) 3-minute multimedia product (video, meme, song, interview, power point presentation, improvised scene or anything their creativity suggested) regarding the role of the export manager, based on their previous or newly acquired knowledge with the goal of making them apply and reflect on what they were learning and experiencing in the Lab, in terms of soft skills (teamwork, negotiation, creativity), digital tools and hard skills (technical content). This task-based approach had the advantage of raising the stakes and giving them a sense of accomplishment at the end of the short workshop by presenting a product. There was even time for a little contest where every team presented their product and voted for their favourite.

Before the beginning of the workshop, a brief guide with the principles of improvisation had been prepared and uploaded in Slack and the students were invited to a dedicated Slack channel, so they could become familiar with the principles and tools that would be applied in the next six weeks and get acquainted with the platform.

In the kick-off meeting, one hour was dedicated to the presentation of the workshop and the main principles of improvisation by making use of games (with a focus on removal of judgement and self-judgement and the concept of "no mistake"), in order to create a welcoming environment, where everyone could feel free to contribute, cooperate and speak up. Ice breakers were used so participants could get to know each other. Some of the trainers involved in the Lab, the tutors and other staff from the organisation also took part. After the presentation of *ALL-EM III Edition* and the tools that would be used, there was another moment of interaction with games and the creation of the teams.

Every meeting started with one or two icebreakers, every time a different one, in order to surprise the students and give them material to work with and reflect upon. Time for group reflection was always left at the end of each session. Every meeting comprised moments of investigation, collaboration, discussion, production and practice (according to the concept of Learning Designer, UCL, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/learning-designer/), though investigation and reflection were also carried out offline, outside the lessons.

Here is a brief overview of the course design, after the kick-off meeting. Some of the games mentioned below will be described in the appendix.

3.1.1 Week 1: Introduction and teambuilding (1.5 hour)

Icebreakers: 1. "What makes you feel good": it was chosen to get them to know each other better and to set a very positive mood right at the start. 2. "A word to inspire your partner": the focus here was active listening and teamwork.

This meeting was dedicated to the presentation of the workshop (methods and goals) and to reflect on the soft skills for the export manager and on digitalisation. After a general brainstorming in plenary, teams were allowed some individual time to reflect on how to prepare for the interviews with their partner companies they would have to conduct later on that day.

The final game was "the secret interview", to reflect on the influence of nonverbal elements (tone, expression, attitude), context and content on the success of an interview or conversation, while having fun.

3.1.2 Week 3: Creativity, collaboration and co-creation (2 hours)

Icebreaker: 1. A form of "follow the follower" with music: it was chosen to work on removing judgement, promoting active listening and teamwork.

The focus of this meeting was on the skills deemed to be the most suitable for the export manager: effective communication, active listening and empathy, self-awareness, time management, strategic thinking, and cultural awareness. Many other skills were mentioned during the brainstorming of the previous meeting, which were made available on a shared Padlet page, and participants started reflecting on them and planning their 'final product'. However, the games proposed were mainly aimed at working on the original skills chosen to be the focus: teamwork, communication skills, creativity, and active listening.

The game of "Gift giving" was played first with a neutral approach from the giver followed by a spontaneous reaction from the recipient and then with a (given) intention followed by a (given) reaction, to focus on paraverbal language and emotions. "Still images" were used to represent soft skills, first in mixed groups and then the official teams worked together. The "Unfortunately/Fortunately" game was used to work on collaboration and co-creation in pairs.

Participants worked all together, in groups, and in pairs, by making use of breakout rooms. Before the last game, they had 20 minutes to discuss how to plan their product for the next and final meeting, in breakout rooms as a team.

3.1.3 Week 5: Co-creation and performance (2 hours)

Icebreaker: 1. A version of follow the follower (since they really enjoyed it on the previous meeting). 2. A funny game of instructions (move, stop, dance, disappear). Besides working on removal of judgement and teamwork, these activities were meant to set a fun and relaxing atmosphere.

This was the day for the presentation of their products, but before that some games were played, among them the "endless story", first together and then in smaller groups. The focus was to have a sort of wrap-up of all the activities done so far, to reflect on and practice the skills trained and foster teamwork and creativity.

After the presentation of their products, the teams had some time in breakout rooms to think of feedback to give the others. They finally voted their favourite work, which would be published on the Facebook page of the University. They could only choose one product, and it could not be their team's.

Time was allowed for general feedback: challenges, personal points of view (how they felt, what they (dis)liked and why) and a general assessment of the workshop.

3.2 Reflections

The 30 participants did not know each other, and they were assigned to the teams according to majors and personality, in order to have teams as balanced as possible. Team building was therefore essential for students to benefit from this experience. Icebreakers at the beginning of every meeting of the workshop, but especially at the kick-off, contributed to setting the scene. They also helped students feel at ease, get to know each other despite being apart and hopefully supported them in a time when Italy was in lockdown, and they could not meet with their friends and peers. This was an opportunity to interact at a deeper level despite being on a screen. No students had their cameras off, which has been a quite common experience teachers have been complaining about since starting teaching online[8]. Exercises were chosen not only to create an enjoyable environment and foster their willingness to participate (with fun games) but also to let them talk about their likes and dislikes, about their feelings, in the challenging moment of lockdown they were going through. The exercise called "what makes me feel good" was particularly appreciated and suitable for the purpose. Most images and concepts made reference to their lives before the lockdown, revealed their personal tastes and created a strong connection between them. It also allowed them to interact with people outside their own team, which otherwise would not have been possible in this online edition. This was one of the mostly appreciated things of this workshop mentioned in the participants' feedback sessions.

During the sessions, the trainer observed that all participants had difficulties with the games on paraverbal language and emotions. They were embarrassed and hesitant when it was their turn. During the reflective discussion at the end of these activities, two or three admitted having difficulties and not liking them much, though seeing the point in making them. There might be different reasons for that: on the one hand, it is probably difficult to express oneself on a screen, and in general, they all admitted they did not like to 'act', they felt embarrassed in showing feelings, and some of them admitted they are shy. On the other hand, it was probably too challenging for a group of beginners with no acting experience at all, and it might have been introduced later after playing with other games. "Follow the follower" and all exercises with musical background were very appreciated: students enjoyed being free and able to express themselves. Nice (conscious and unconscious) interactions emerged during those activities, some preferred proposing and leading, other following, this was a fruitful moment of reflection for them, because they could reflect on the type of person they instinctively are when they do something they enjoy without having to follow a clear

[8] This was the most recurring comment at the 8th Scenario Forum when speaking about the downsides of online teaching, and in general the most common complaint expressed by colleagues in more informal chats.

instruction. “Unfortunately/fortunately” revealed their positive or negative attitude to life and their reaction to ‘setbacks’: some had great creativity and never discouraged, some had more difficulties in coping with or finding ‘adverse’ events following the ‘unfortunately’, and others felt frustrated at not being able to find the ‘right’ flow of the story.

Overall, they enjoyed the workshop and found it a nice change from the difficult situation they were in at the time, and within the whole Lab, which was otherwise more ‘traditional’ (although they really appreciated ALL-EM for the innovative approach, the high level of expert and committed trainers). When asked about what they had learnt thanks to this module, in particular, their perception of the workshop was not much about learning something new, but about having a space of freedom to meet, connect and interact. From the trainer’s point of view, they were not conscious of learning any soft skills, yet they were applying them without realising it.

The reflection process was considered a fundamental part of this work. In the workshop meetings, time for discussion and feedback was always allowed after every activity. However, participants were not very keen on expressing themselves when it came to reflection. Part of the problem with resistance to reflection probably lies in the attitude of the new generation, who is less used to making choices and taking responsibilities (La Marca & Gülbay, 2018). However, reflective practice is not an easy task, and it requires practice. More time dedicated to personal reflection and more targeted questions, or a structured interview would probably help them reflect more effectively. This requires careful planning and coordinating with other trainers and should be explored in the future editions. The reflective practice will have to be reviewed in the next edition.

The six products presented on the last day were all very creative: they were original products, the result of collaborative work, revisiting concepts and experience in a personal light, making use of different media and tools (video, audio, improvisation, images, props, different contexts and environments, backgrounds, filters etc.). They were all very entertaining, some extremely ironic, some realistic and others fictional. They all showed great collaboration, commitment, fun and – paradoxically – a deep reflection on the whole content and approach of the entire Lab. Most of the participants appeared to go out of their comfort zone by performing in ways the trainer had never seen before in the meetings, probably helped by the fact that it was recorded material, not acted on the spot. Still, there were some remarkable and brave performances: one of the groups had the courage to improvise a scene. They were able to exploit the potential of Zoom and all its features to make it realistic and enjoyable. The other five groups decided to present pre-recorded videos, thus applying their digital reproduction competency (see La Marca & Gülbay, 2018). They used musical backgrounds, props, material coming from several different sources (personal videos, combined with

pictures and videos found online), backgrounds and filters in Zoom. But they also edited the videos by making use of specific software tools.

This final activity was considered a great success by both the trainer, who did not expect such a high commitment to the final product (as it was not meant to be marked) and by the tutors, who had been following them all through the process, and knew their potential better. Many of the presentations referred to people or events occurred during the Lab, thus making it harder for a potential external audience to enjoy it. This was not a problem, as the product was meant to be a performative reflection on the workshop, and it also showed how deeply they had connected and shared experiences. They were all very proud of their work. The trainer's favourite, which was not the winner, is extremely interesting on a number of levels and it can be retrieved on Vimeo[9]. The most remarkable elements are: the high level of interaction and cooperation of all the team members, the fun and enjoyment that clearly show, the focus on soft skills (mentioned and performed), the creativity (the final scene is genius), the cultural-awareness (the inclusion of a bottle of prosecco in the scene of the trading abilities is an ironic homage to the Veneto region, where the university is located, and the representation of a typical stereotype of Italian people giving gifts as sign of appreciation), and their ability in using digital tools.

Regarding the virtual environment, there were not any particular technical issues: everyone was used to having lessons online by then, one year into the pandemic. Most technical issues and familiarity with the virtual environment had probably already been solved and acquired in the previous academic year of 'emergency online teaching'. Students were already relatively at ease with the virtual environment. Moreover, one of the tutors was expert in digital tools and was always ready to help. Clear instructions were given in Slack, and then repeated during the meetings; short training was also given for the less known tools. In terms of digital skills, there were some critical issues related to potential copyright breaches in the final products (music and image credits missing, for example), probably due to the fact that this topic was not explicitly dealt with during seminars or lectures, and it had never been mentioned. These topics are probably something school and university should work more on (ECDL Foundation, 2014). However, participants showed an ease in using and interacting with all the tools required. Their multimedia products were very professional, combining many skills. Collaboration and co-creation online proved to be easy and successful.

[9] Go to https://vimeo.com/527816963#.

3.3 Adaptation

The workshop *Soft Skills or Digital Skills: Is This The Question?* presented at the *8th Scenario Forum Symposium* only lasted 45 minutes and was aimed at giving an overview of the whole soft skill module of ALL-EM III Edition, *Teatro d'impresa - Teambuilding*. The advantage was to have already experienced participants: all of them were practitioners, artists and teachers using drama, or researchers in this field. Therefore, there was not much need for explanations or practice of the principles underlying it, the focus was on experiencing as many games as possible and discussing possible applications and adaptation to their courses and subjects. Their average age was slightly higher than the participants in ALL-EM. So, there was more need to better explain some advanced functions in the use of the digital platform, Zoom. Moreover, tips were given on how to make the most of its functions, and other digital platforms for collaboration were introduced. The most useful functions in Zoom mentioned were: breakout rooms (for pair and group work), share screen with its advanced version of sharing only audio (i.e., music for the "follow the follower"), shared whiteboard, and "hide non video participants" in the video setting (not all participants were aware of this useful function). Solving technical issues took slightly longer than expected. There can be many reasons why: first, this workshop was shorter and the participants had less time to get acquainted with the virtual environment; second, it was not possible to contact the participants in advance to train or instruct them on the technicalities before the meeting; and lastly, we did not have a dedicated expert to take care of it, so the trainer had to take care of it while facilitating. Yet, the process of teaching and supporting participants in solving technical issues was an integral part of acquiring new digital skills, one of the original goals of the *Teatro d'impresa* module. Nobody taught soft skills, but they all found the workshop useful.

The workshop opened with sharing the trainer's favourite video to clearly illustrate the starting point of the workshop and the context (as it condensed everything in three minutes): goals, skills and focus on digital competence. Then the participants were invited to practice with a few selected games. After each game, participants had time to reflect on the possible application and impact on their practice. The games presented were: what makes you feel good, still images, unfortunately/fortunately and gift giving. The other games were only mentioned and briefly described in case nobody already knew them.

In general, most participants appeared to be familiar with the games and some had already used them in-person before, but the adaptation to the virtual environment and the soft skills training were very appreciated. All confirmed that the most difficult game is "gift giving" with the use of emotional responses, as it implies some acting abilities, or at least some level of confidence with performing, which is not typical of students, especially when they are not studying drama.

This short 45-minute workshop confirmed the effectiveness of using drama in creating a welcoming environment leading to a more fruitful collaboration and a willingness to practice. It also confirmed how versatile performative teaching can be, the same games can be applied to obtain multiple results, besides training soft skills: work on vocabulary, communication and dialogue, practice grammar, use language to describe images, remove fear of public speaking, manage stress for a better performance, and so much more.

Overall, the general feedback was that these exercises can be successfully used online. Despite agreeing that the work with performative teaching is much more effective in-person, all participants admitted that these games worked much better than expected online. Moreover, practising the different functions offered by the virtual environment (Zoom functions or having search engines at disposal for backgrounds or prompts for still images, for instance) made participants more confident in exploring and exploiting the virtual environment.

4 Conclusions

Carrying out the workshop online surely had an impact on its results and effectiveness. However, the trainer's perception is that it had a much lesser impact than expected. Success and effectiveness depended more on the participants' commitment and motivation rather than the fact of being online and unable to physically interact. The willingness to be with people and communicate made the virtual environment just as good as any other: at that time, nobody could meet in-person.

It is hard to say how different the impact of a performative soft skills workshop carried out in-person is from one carried out online, especially considering the context of restrictions and the total lack of alternatives to the virtual environment at that time. However, the point to make here is that the virtual environment did not prevent the participants from enjoying the workshop and benefiting from it. From the trainer's point of view, the *Teatro d'Impresa – Team Building* workshop was successful, in that the participants attended regularly, really committed, never backed out, and were willing to get out of their comfort zone.

The adaptation to the 45-minute workshop *Digital Skills or Soft Skills: Is This the Question?* also confirmed that the virtual environment can be a place where you can teach and learn performatively.

When workshops are carried out in a virtual environment, additional digital learning training in advance of workshops would support a focus on performative learning and help participants to hone their digital skills.

Coming to the two initial questions:

- Is soft skills training with a performative method possible in the virtual environment?
- Can it be used as a way to train digital skills?

The answer to the first question seems to be yes from the trainer's point of view, even though further research is necessary to establish whether the virtual environment can be as effective as face-to-face training. Moreover, individual skills to be trained will have to be investigated in terms of the most appropriate games and activities and their adaptation to this new environment.

As far as the second question is concerned, this experience has shown that soft and digital skills can be successfully integrated, but more structured research is necessary to support this idea and investigate different contexts, target groups and more specific skills.

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5 Appendix I

Games

Here you can find a selection of the games used in the workshop just to give a general idea of the type of activities carried out during the workshop. They are very common games among teachers, trainers and practitioners using a performative approach and can be easily adapted to other purposes or courses, as confirmed by the participants in the workshop presented at the *8th Scenario Forum*.

What makes you feel good is played in a "virtual circle" (rename and number participants to identify the order). Every participant says what makes them feel good (a word/concept or a very short story, maximum 30 seconds), then they make a gesture to mime it, the next participant goes on and does the same, and so on. In a second round the participants say again what makes them feel good and make a corresponding gesture (they can use the same concept or something else, I personally encourage them to change), but this time all the others copy the gesture, and then it goes on with the next participant and so on. Another round can be played by only making gestures, without sounds, or by saying things and letting others do the gesture, there are endless possibilities of variation, according to time and need.

Follow the follower is a very common exercise where participants walk, move, or do any other action while being in the same place, in connection, influencing each other without being forced to do anything. Every person chooses another one in the group and can either copy them, copy and add something to their movements, copy and exaggerate, change something

or integrate, and they can even stand still. You can decide any time to change person and start "working" with another peer, who does not have to be aware of it or to copy you as well. There are many different versions. In this online version the options were: do anything independently from the other (dance or make any movement), copy somebody, or copy and integrate or copy and add, or exaggerate. The only indication was to stay in the present, feel the connection with the others (though being on a screen), follow the instinct, and feel free to do what they wanted. Music in the background can help participants feel more relaxed and be inspired. Another version had them paired, so that they had to "interact" with a given person, and then pairs were put together and started working in groups of 4 and then 8. This game fosters collaboration, creativity, observation and active listening. It helped students realise whether they tend to follow or propose, what makes them feel more comfortable, either to be a leader or a follower.

Still image is a very popular exercise (for more details you can read Schewe and Woodhouse, 2018), it can be played by setting "hide non video participants" in Zoom, so as to create a sort of "virtual stage" where only the members of the group are visible on the screen, and the image can be better enjoyed. They can be prepared in advance by giving some time to the group to organise it in the breakout rooms, or they can be improvised on request, to make students work under pressure.

Unfortunately/fortunately is a game played in pairs where you build a story starting from the same neutral sentence or situation adding a new episode each, with the obligation of always beginning your sentence with the same adverb, either "fortunately" or "unfortunately", after a while the two people in the pair can switch role and use the other adverb, to experience how different it is to find a positive or a negative situation.

Gift giving is also a very popular game. It can be played all together, in a virtual circle, or in smaller groups in breakout rooms. In the first round a person gives a gift to the next without any particular intention or emotion, the recipient must accept it and react with an emotion or intention. Then the next round can be played by asking the giver to add an emotion/intention and let the recipient experience the emotive reaction to that. A third round can be played by suggesting the emotion to be taken, just to see how difficult / easy it is to react on command. There are so many variants to this game that can be played according to time, need, and the atmosphere to be created in the group.