

## Comment by Jose Roberto Guevara

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*(English)*

**Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, Australia**

Reading Priti Sharma's paper on "Soft skills in non-formal education: building capacities of the youth" published in *Adult Education and Development* 83 (2016) have made me reflect on three challenges that we as adult educators may think about. These challenges are: (1) the dominant notion that soft skills are for employability; (2) the dichotomy between hard and soft skills as they relate to formal and non-formal education, and (3) the challenge for teaching and learning soft skills to be able to 'measure' learning outcomes.

The value of soft skills for young people is indeed not a contested statement. What I would contest is how the value of soft skills continues to narrowly linked to how it is essential if young people are to secure "success in today's world, particularly in contemporary careers and workplaces" (Sharma 2016). This dominant assumption that for skills to be relevant they must be linked to work is what I would argue diminishes the potential application of soft skills to contribute to both work and life, especially within our rapidly changing world.

However, I appreciate how this link to the world of work helps to promote and advance the teaching of soft skills for young people. Recent research in Australia, by The Foundation for Young Australian (fya) entitled "The New Basics: Big Data reveals the skills young people need for the New Work Order"<sup>[1]</sup> in 2016 has identified eight transferable skills they have called enterprise skills. These are problem-solving, communication skills, digital literacy, teamwork, financial literacy, creativity, critical thinking and presentation skills. They describe them as "not just for entrepreneurs; they are skills that are required in many jobs." And that these skills have been "found to be a powerful predictor of long term job success." (fya 2016: 5). They continue to say that these skills are sometimes called "generic, soft or 21st century skills." However, they also emphasise, and I wholly agree that they are "a set of skills and characteristics that enable young people to confront the challenges of change and navigate a complex future" (fya 2016:5).

It is this emphasis to confronting change and the ability to navigate the future that I feel needs to be emphasised to young people, rather than emphasising that these skills will promise work. In my university role managing the postgraduate program in International Development at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, I often am asked this question – "What job does this degree promise when I graduate?" I honestly tell them that I am not in any position of promising jobs but instead ask them – "Do you think that when you graduate after two years, there will still be development issues that need to be addressed?" They say, "Yes." So I say, clearly there is work that needs to be done. But will this work continue to be paid by the same employers, like development NGOs that often seem to be the first choice of students of international development? I inform them that due to the decline in government funding for foreign aid, particularly in Australia,

most development NGOs have had to shed staff. However, I explain that part of the knowledge and skills we want young and passionate development workers to learn is the capacity to not just understand the complex nature of development but to also to see how they can begin to find resources to support the kind of work they want to do. So I acknowledge that part of this will require my students to be entrepreneurial, but equally important is for them to be able to understand why they need to learn to be entrepreneurial, if they hope to effectively contribute to achieving sustainable development in our rapidly changing world (not just the world of work).

The second challenge is the tendency to create a dichotomy between formal and non-formal education, often in terms of learning the hard skills in the formal education system and the soft skills in the non-formal education system. I think that emphasising this dichotomy is no longer helpful. Instead, as Priti Sharma mentioned, we should indeed advocate that quality and relevant education must recognise the holistic and interconnected nature of skills, as recognised by the three categories of basic, technical and transferable. They are not just relevant for work and life in the future, but in fact essential if young people are to contribute to shaping a future that does not repeat the same mistakes we have made in the past. Not only will both formal and non-formal education have a role to play, they will need to begin to work more effectively together if we are to ensure an education system that will continue to be relevant to young people in the future.

Finally, one of the challenges we face as adult educators is how to effectively teach young people these soft skills because they are difficult to assess in the traditional approach we “test” skills. And therefore, also difficult for the learner to themselves acknowledge what they are learning or have learned. I would argue that classroom-based methods is no longer appropriate for the teaching, learning and assessment of soft skills.

In conclusion, it is the combination of the recognition that soft skills is not just about work, therefore they can be learned and applied in our daily lives; that both formal and non-formal education have significant roles to play in the teaching and learning of relevant work and life skills, and therefore both formal and non-formal education will need to continue to develop innovative ways of working together to effectively teach and assess the development of these relevant skills, if we are truly to contribute to quality education for sustainable development.

PRIA’s training and manual on soft skills, which they have conducted with the DVV South and South East Asia office, is an example of a valuable contribution to addressing the challenges I have identified. I invite our participants in this virtual seminar to share their own innovative and creative approaches to helping to advance our practice of teaching and learning soft skills, not just for employability but for the sustainability of our communities.

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[1] [https://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/The-New-Basics\\_Update\\_Web.pdf](https://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/The-New-Basics_Update_Web.pdf)

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