

An Approach to Fostering People Skills in Music and Entertainment Programs

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Abstract

There is wide agreement that the music and entertainment field is a people business. What is less clear is how to foster people skills in a college curriculum already loaded with domain specific content including music production and industry. One approach could be based on a theoretical foundation taken from the work of psychologist Angela Duckworth. The non-cognitive skills such as grit and self-control that she has identified as predictors of success in life correlate fairly closely with many of the top-rated characteristics reported by David Tough as being desirable in new hires from audio engineering education programs. A survey of initiatives that we are implementing in our audio engineering program to develop communication skills and character strengths is included.

Introduction

The music and entertainment industry is a people business. Students are often told how important it is to find one's passion, develop contacts, promote oneself, and get practical experience. We may find ourselves wondering, however, how much change in personality is possible for those who are not naturally extroverted, and what we can do to foster people skills in a curriculum that is already packed with domain-specific content.

In his paper "Shaping Future Audio Engineering Curricula: An Expert Panel's View" David Tough reported that audio professionals rate communication skills and other personal qualities as the most important qualities in graduates of audio engineering programs. This, combined with Susan Cain's *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* suggest that teaching technical skills and networking is not enough to prepare students for successful careers, and that a rethinking of curricula in music and entertainment programs to promote personal development is needed.

What Employers Look For

The audio experts in Tough's research were asked to rank competencies they felt essential for audio engineering students planning careers in the music production industry of the future. Twenty of the top-ranked thirty characteristics chosen by the participants belong to the "communications/leadership/other" category, a finding that is consistent with several other competency-based studies [Tough 2009, 156]. These included the ability to work hard and complete projects, take personal responsibility, listen effectively, communicate clearly and tactfully, dependable, attention to detail, work effectively on a team, be able to handle criticism, patience, self-starter, and avoid and resolve conflict. There was some agreement that today's music production environment involves multiple competencies and technology that is rapidly changing and that formal training in schools may be needed to develop a foundation instead of going through the traditional path for

engineers to go through an apprenticeship. The qualities that the audio experts reported valuing in graduates of audio engineering programs were assistant engineers that are good communicators, work hard, and being able to function independently as well as in a team. Some felt that they can teach new employees how to operate equipment but that they can't teach them the interpersonal skills necessary to function on the job.

Tough concluded his study with eight conclusions and nine recommendations. "Communications/leadership/other competencies are essential for future AET graduates... Administrators overseeing AET programs must provide coursework for students to develop communication and leadership competencies. This includes requiring written papers, group work, and face-to-face skill building to build client relations skills." It is not hard to imagine how some communication skills could be developed, and typical degree programs already cover some of the basics. However, the challenge that Tough puts forth does not seem to have been picked up in academia and further study and experimentation is needed.

Tough admits that "many of the communications/leadership/other content domain are the hardest for audio engineering educators to implement and measure." Several sources in Tough's dissertation commented that it is difficult to teach people skills in school, and that the best place to learn them is in real world situations like internships. However, since they rank the highest in terms of desirability and if these skills are in fact so important for success it seems worth doing whatever is possible to help students develop them as part their formal education instead of assuming it will be taken care of during an internship. If we decide to attempt to teach these skill we are then faced with the challenge that they can be the hardest for faculty to teach, and to assess. In addition there are practical questions such as where this training could fit in a four-year curriculum that is already packed, and who on the faculty has the expertise to teach them.

Positive Psychology

Tough grouped the qualities that respondents reported as important into seven categories: general audio, MIDI, digital audio, traditional business and music business, music, electronics, and communications/leadership/other. The last category, which was shown to have the highest-rated qualities as ranked by the experts, is so broad that it is difficult to see how to approach developing it in students. One approach could be to use as a theoretical foundation research from the positive psychology movement, a branch of psychology that seeks to achieve "the good life" through the application of the scientific method, rather than focusing on the traditional activities of treating mental illness. Topics of interest to researchers in positive psychology include the flow state, strengths, virtues, and talents. Their view of human beings as being drawn by the future rather than driven by the past could have many applications in the music and entertainment industry as it adapts to a new business model.

In his book *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough describes changes in the curriculum at the KIPP schools, a program for high-performing public schools begun in Houston in 1994 that has since expanded to include 162 schools in 20 states. There are now 59,000 students in the program, mostly from low-income African American or Latino families. KIPP focuses on seven characteristics identified by Angela Duckworth which she believes to be important for engaged, happy, and successful lives—grit, self-

control, social intelligence, zest, gratitude, optimism, and curiosity. These come from a larger group of 24 proposed by Peterson and Seligman in their book *Character Strengths and Virtues*, which they intended to provide a framework for developing applications of positive psychology. According to the research statement of Duckworth's lab, "Some educators prefer the umbrella term 'social and emotional learning,' whereas many other educators, as well as philosophers and positive psychologists, embrace the moral connotations of 'character' and 'virtue.'"

Duckworth has shown that grit is a better predictor of success than IQ, SAT or standardized test scores, and physical fitness in a wide variety of experiments with diverse populations, such as military cadets, spelling bee champions, novice teachers, sales agents, and high school graduation rates. She found that grit correlates with lifetime educational attainment and reduction in career changes and divorce. The appeal of Duckworth's focus on character strengths is that they seem to account for the communication/leadership/other skills identified by David Tough's research, as shown in Figure 1:

Angela Duckworth	Definition	David Tough
grit	perseverance and passion for long-term goals, mental toughness and courage	1 work hard and complete projects 2 personal responsibility 5 attention to detail 8 strong passion for what they do 9 dependability
self-control	self-regulation: ability to control your impulses, emotions, behavior, and desires	11 demonstrate patience 16 handle delicate and high pressure situations 17 be able to change adapt to dynamic environment
social intelligence	the ability to get along well with others, and to get them to cooperate with you; the capacity to effectively negotiate complex social relationships and environments	3 communicate clearly and tactfully 4 be an effective listener 7 professional around clients 11 work effectively on a team 12 handle criticism 18 use tact and diplomacy 19 avoid and resolve conflict 22 interact with diverse types of people 23 demonstrate humility 26 work under authority
zest	a feeling of enjoyment and enthusiasm, a lively quality that increases enjoyment, excitement or energy	14 self-starter
curiosity	inquisitive thinking such as exploration, investigation, and learning. A thirst for knowledge and desire to learn	15 life-long learner

Figure 1: Correlation between Angela Duckworth’s character strengths and desirable characteristics in audio engineers identified in Tough’s research.

Figure 1 shows how the top thirty top-rated characteristics identified in Tough’s correlate fairly closely with five of Duckworth’s character strengths. The number preceding the skill in Tough’s column indicate its ranking among the 160 in the study. Only nine of Tough’s top thirty involved general audio or digital skills, such as basic knowledge of effects, the ability to analyze basic audio signal flow, and to organize data.

Communication Skills

The communication skills identified in Tough’s research have been listed as social intelligence qualities in Table 1. Among the top thirty skills are “Demonstrate the ability to be an effective listener towards co-workers and clients,” “Demonstrate the ability to communicate clearly and tactfully with clients and co-workers,” “Ability to handle criticism,” and “Demonstrate an ability to use tact and diplomacy.” Further down

the list were “Demonstrate the ability to write letters, technical papers, and other documents using good grammar, punctuation, and techniques,” “The importance of building relationships within the local community,” “Identify the types of music business professionals to contact when you need music business help,” and “Negotiate effectively with artists.” While written and verbal skills play a part in these communication skills, it is doubtful that participation in traditional writing and public speaking classes will be enough to develop the skills identified here.

Jeff McDonald, Vice President of Human Resources at Sweetwater Sound, Inc., the third-largest music retailer in the United States, says that there are three basic things that they look for when hiring sales engineers. He says that graduates of our music production program do well in the technical chops area, but not as well in communication skills. He describes some as “introverted techies” and on visits to our program tells students that the most important class in their four year academic career is their speech class, and the second most important are their writing classes. The company looks for candidates who are able to build a relationship with a stranger over the phone since that is how they talk to most of their customers. McDonald says that about 40% of college graduates struggle with the communications aspect of the job interview: “It is astonishing how many young college folks today test very smart, are speed demons on a computer, but can't tell you in five minutes who they are without it being absolutely painful.”

Grit

For Duckworth, grit, “the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals” is the most important character strength. Five of the top characteristics in Tough’s study fall into this category: “Demonstrate the ability to work hard and complete projects,” “Recognize the need for personal responsibility,” “Demonstrate the ability to pay attention to detail,” “Show a strong passion for what they do,” and “Demonstrate dependability.”

The third quality that Sweetwater looks for when evaluating candidates is “fire in the belly. Does the candidate exhibit attributes like optimism, positive approach to life, self reliance, proactivity, perseverance, patience. This is a great job that, if successful, will pay better than 95% of other jobs in the music industry, but to be successful the candidate must manage themselves, be patient because success isn’t instant, and work hard. Frankly this is an area where some other schools are doing a better job than [at your school]. The bulk of your graduates do fine on the tech test and about average on perseverance and relationship building skills. We have had an unusual amount of folks from your program get hired and then quit after a year or so because they feel the job is ‘too hard’ or ‘not my thing.’ Instant gratification is a problem for this generation no matter what school they go to.”

Self-control

Self-control, “the voluntary regulation of behavioral, emotional, and attentional impulses in the presence of momentarily gratifying temptations or diversions is the second focus for Duckworth’s research. Children who exhibit self-control (like being able to wait to eat a marshmallow) are later found to be more conscientious as adults, and are

more dependable, punctual, and orderly, among other things. Duckworth says she studies grit and self-control “because they contribute to the quality and quantity of effort individuals invest in their goals... Ultimately, what I am after is a deeper understanding of the psychology of effort.” This aligns with exhortations given to students such as “You get out of it what you put into it,” “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, again”

Characteristics from those in the top-30 rated list in Tough’s research that could be considered manifestations of self control are “Demonstrate patience in a working environment,” “Demonstrate an ability to handle delicate and high pressure situations in a professional manner,” and “Demonstrate flexibility and the ability to change and adapt to a dynamic environment. These characteristics align with exhortations often made to students such as “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, again,” “Nothing worth having comes easily,” and “Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

Any character strength can be overdone. While there are times and situations in which self-control can benefit creativity one can imagine that too much of it could limit some forms of expression for performers.

Social Intelligence

Social intelligence—the ability to get along well with others, and to get them to cooperate with you; the capacity to effectively negotiate complex social relationships and environments—accounts for the largest number of desirable characteristics in Tough’s study. Those in the top-30 include “The ability to be professional around clients,” “Work effectively on a team,” “Demonstrate the ability to interact with diverse types of people,” “Demonstrate the ability to avoid or resolve potential human conflict situations,” “Demonstrate humility in a working environment,” and “Develop the ability to work well under the authority of a mentor.” Others in the complete list of 160 are “Inspire confidence in clients,” “Demonstrate leaderships skills and the ability to lead a small team,” and “Demonstrate the ability to resolve conflict through building consensus.”

Knowing when to talk, and when not to, is one of the attributes given by veteran engineer Al Schmitt that showed up from polling twelve experienced colleagues was “Transparent work ethic—can be attentive or in the background.” Interns need to be sensitive to clients and understand their place in the hierarchy. One of the questions on the quiz for prospective interns in Sweetwater’s recording studio is at what point an intern should get on the talkback system to inform the client that they are singing out of tune. The correct answer may be “never.”

Zest

Enthusiasm and energy are important to keep projects and careers moving forward. Zest is the lighter side of perseverance and as such shares has some of the qualities characteristics listed under grit. A Top-30 characteristics from Tough’s study is “Demonstrate an ability to be self-starting.” Further down the list is “Put into practice the ability to maintain a sense of humor.” Al Schmitt says assistant engineers should be “eager, sharp, and enthusiastic... somebody who can look thirty seconds into the future and anticipate what’s going on.”

Another aspect of zest is having a passion for what you do, something that is one of the first qualities that many people report as being key in the music and entertainment field.

Curiosity

The desire to know and learn shows in the top-30 characteristic “Develop the ability to be a life-long learner’ who continues in their personal development.” The audio industry is changing rapidly and much of what students learn will be obsolete by the time they graduate. Many of the jobs that they will end up doing have not been invented at the time they enter college. It is important for students to learn how to learn, and to develop the initiative to continue self-training. Employers are looking for problem solvers.

Gratitude

There were two character strengths identified by Duckworth as important for success and happiness that were not needed to account for Tough’s top-30: gratitude and optimism. Gratitude, the acknowledgment of a benefit that one has received, could be a positive quality as part of social intelligence when working with other people. A sense of entitlement, which lies on the opposite end of the spectrum from gratitude, makes it hard to negotiate and compromise, easier to feel sorry for oneself, and more likely to make unreasonable demands, none of which sits well with employers.

Optimism

The music business is said to be a people business, but one that also depends on talent and luck. Luck is sometimes defined as “preparedness meets opportunity” or being in the right place at the right time. However, Richard Wiseman’s research has shown that people make their own good and bad fortune. Anxiety disrupts people’s ability to notice unexpected opportunities. One way lucky people process bad experiences differently is by looking on the bright side, by considering ways in which things could have turned out worse. This helps keep expectations about the future high, and quicker to pick up on opportunities that could lead to beneficial situations.

Optimism was one of the two character strengths that didn’t correlate with David Tough’s findings. Merely visualizing a positive outcome is not enough however. A number of pop psychology books have promoted the idea that visualizing outcomes can increase the chances of them coming about, for example that imagining success can help achieve it. In her. The experiments described in Gabriele Oettingen book *Rethinking Positive Thinking* suggest the opposite, that the pleasant imagining of desired results lowers energy and makes the person less likely to put in the effort required to achieve them in reality.

Implementation

One question that often arises when discussing how to teach personal skills is whether some people are just naturally more gifted in them and that they are natural

qualities that cannot be learned, that one either has or not. Duckworth points out that “the language that we use to describe grit and self-control—words like ‘character’ or ‘personality trait’—may connote some immutability.” It is commonly believed that personality is inherent and doesn’t change much.

Duckworth believes that one promising direction for developing changes in character comes from the research of Clara Dweck, who says there are two mindsets with which to look at people: a growth mindset in which people believe that ability can be developed through dedication and hard work, and a fixed mindset, in which intelligence and talent are fixed traits. In her book *Mindset*, Dweck says people can change more throughout all phases of life than is generally believed, and that one way to develop a growth mindset is by learning about the neuroplasticity of the brain and how new pathways can be formed and intelligence increased. Duckworth says that “individuals who believe that frustration and confusion mean they should quit what they are doing may be taught that these emotions are common during the learning process.” In our audio production classes we take the opportunity to point out the technical and musical challenges that arise when recording music are to be expected and are things that everyone has to work through, and are planning a workshop as part of the freshmen experience on the plasticity of the brain and how its structure changes as part of learning. We will look for opportunities to partner with other programs on campus to reinforce communication skills and character strengths with the goal of making students more aware of the process and more frequent opportunities to grow.

A number of methods are used at the KIPP schools to teach character inside and outside the classroom. They believe it is important label and talk about character strengths in order to strengthen them. Duckworth’s seven character strengths are presented at the beginning of some classes and opportunities taken throughout the semester to point out examples of when they are present or not. The list of Duckworth’s seven character strengths is used as a banner in some Blackboard courses.

Progress towards character strengths is tracked at KIPP and progress discussed regularly. An online form was created making it easy for the teacher to report anecdotes that still fresh in their mind after class. These are automatically written into a database that advisors can refer to when counseling students at the end of each semester in order to see if a pattern is present, and what strengths and weaknesses have been observed over the years. Students at KIPP are praised when they exhibit a growth mindset around character, and we will try to point out occasions where students show themselves to be open to growth.

One reason that grit is hard to measure is because it expresses itself over a longer timescale. One of the motivations for instituting a portfolio for our production majors is to be able to assess progress over a four-year period in order to get an idea of how passionate students are and how they are progressing towards long-term goals. Engineers in Tough’s study indicated that students should complete 15-20 individual and group projects and we are working on a web service to make it easier for local and campus musicians to register their interest and availability for recording sessions and outside projects will be required as part of the assignments given in audio production classes so that students will have gain more experience and work with a wider variety of clients instead of just recording themselves and their friends.

We have partnered with the Emerging Media center on a living-learning community where incoming majors will live. Special programming will include the brain workshop, a lecture on leadership, field trips to industry partners, and a group therapy opportunity run by one of the therapists from the Counseling Center.

We are beginning to discuss Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* with freshmen and above during advising sessions and suggesting that they consider his habit of beginning with the end in mind, and to push them more to get practical experience, increase their number of contacts, and accept opportunities that arise. When looking at progress in completing the four-year plan we will review development of the student's portfolio

We will broaden our policy of not accepting late work in more classes in classes for students in our department.

We will do more problem based learning in order to develop more problem solving skills.

We are beginning to match juniors with freshmen as mentors and will see if there is improvement in retention rates and satisfaction reported in exit interviews.

We will look for more opportunities in classes to have students present individual and group work and to stress the importance of applying themselves in their writing and speech classes. We will continue to discuss methods for making written and verbal constructive comments when critiquing projects, and for extracting useful information from more pointed comments as they arise.

In the senior capstone course we are using the WOOP strategy, otherwise known as mental contrasting, developed by Gabriele Oettingen to help students achieve their goals and make more consistent progress during the semester. Students first imagine their wish (W), the desired outcome for the week. The outcome (O) and obstacles (O) to achieving it are considered, and a plan (P) articulated.

Assessment

Assessment of growth in communication skills and character strengths is difficult to measure, and we do not have a control group with whom we can compare our students. Having students write self-evaluations early and at the end of the program should, however, make them more aware of the process of growth.

We will continue to collect information on communication skills and character strengths from supervisors of internships.

We will stay in touch with industry partners and see if they notice a change in communication skills and grit in new graduates applying for positions with them.

We are looking for a campus partner to collaborate on running an experiment to compare the scores on Duckworth's grit quiz from students in our major with those in other related departments, such as visual arts and telecommunications. We will conduct entrance and exit interviews with majors and see if they notice a change in their work habits.

We will monitor statistics on passing the junior proficiency writing exam that all undergrads must take to see if there is a noticeable change in our students compared to similar departments.

We will continue to ask alumni and industry partners about communication skills and character strengths that they see as valuable and see how they fit with Duckworth's seven characteristics in order to decide if we need to change our emphasis.

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