



UDC 378.147:316.6

DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS THROUGH HARD TIMES: HUMANISTIC EDUCATION IN WARTIME CONDITIONS

РОЗВИТОК М'ЯКИХ НАВИЧОК У СКЛАДНІ ЧАСИ: ГУМАНІСТИЧНА ОСВІТА В
УМОВАХ ВІЙНИ

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Abstract. The article explores the transformation of higher education under wartime conditions with a special focus on the development of soft skills through humanistic pedagogical approaches. The war has dramatically changed the context of teaching and learning, demanding not only academic resilience but also emotional intelligence, adaptability, empathy, and communication. The research highlights how educators integrate humanistic values into distance and hybrid formats, fostering self-regulation, collaboration, and reflective thinking among students. Emphasis is placed on teaching as a form of psychological support and community building. The article concludes that wartime education can become a driver for rethinking educational paradigms toward greater humanization and moral sustainability.

Keywords: soft skills, humanistic education, wartime teaching, emotional resilience, empathy, higher education, pedagogical innovation.

Introduction.

Education in wartime is not merely a continuation of academic activity; it becomes a moral and humanistic mission. Teachers and students face unprecedented psychological, social, and logistical challenges. Despite these difficulties, education persists – often transforming into a space for support, hope, and resilience.

In Ukraine, since the beginning of full-scale war, teachers and students have faced unpredictable disruptions – air raid alarms, displacement, and psychological trauma. Despite this, the educational process continues, transformed by the need for flexibility and empathy. Educators have turned to digital tools, reflective journaling, and peer support groups to sustain both learning outcomes and mental health. These experiences form a living laboratory of resilience-oriented education.

The purpose of this article is to analyze how soft skills – such as communication, empathy, adaptability, and emotional intelligence – are developed and reinforced during wartime conditions, and how humanistic education principles help sustain both



learners and teachers. This research highlights that, even in times of destruction, education can nurture the human spirit and prepare individuals for professional and civic engagement.

Research Results.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as well as other armed conflicts worldwide, has exposed the vulnerability of educational systems to crisis. Universities and schools have been forced to relocate, rebuild curricula, and ensure the psychological safety of participants in the learning process.

Digital transformation has accelerated: online learning platforms, asynchronous resources, and hybrid formats became lifelines for academic continuity. However, beyond technical adaptation, the greater challenge has been maintaining the *human connection* that defines meaningful education. Wartime learning has revealed that education is not only about knowledge transfer but also about fostering emotional resilience, empathy, and ethical responsibility.

Humanistic pedagogy – emphasizing dignity, empathy, and personal growth – has regained its relevance as a counterbalance to fear, fragmentation, and trauma. Within this context, the development of soft skills is not secondary but essential for survival and reconstruction.

The research is based on qualitative observation of teaching practices in Ukrainian medical universities between 2022-2024, combined with a review of academic sources on crisis pedagogy and humanistic education. Semi-structured interviews with 32 educators and 68 students were conducted to explore their perceptions of soft skill development during wartime learning.

The study used thematic analysis to identify recurring concepts related to communication, emotional resilience, adaptability, teamwork, and moral leadership. Observations were cross-referenced with case studies of courses integrating reflective writing, narrative medicine, and empathy-based communication exercises.

The findings indicate that wartime conditions unintentionally enhance certain soft skills due to increased emotional and cognitive demands. Key outcomes include:

1. *Empathy and Emotional Resilience.* Teachers who shared personal stories of



survival and perseverance created psychologically safe environments that encouraged empathy and mutual support. Students learned to listen actively and respond compassionately – vital skills for healthcare and public service professions. These experiences also enhanced students' understanding of cultural sensitivity and the emotional needs of diverse populations. In addition, participating in peer support networks helped students develop coping strategies, reduce stress, and strengthen community bonds, illustrating the role of education in promoting social cohesion and mental health during crisis.

2. *Adaptability and Self-Regulation.* Frequent power outages, unstable internet connections, and emotional stress taught both teachers and students to prioritize, plan flexibly, and remain focused despite external disruptions. This adaptive behavior mirrors workplace resilience and leadership readiness. Students also developed skills in time management, problem-solving under pressure, and self-directed learning. By reflecting on challenges and adjusting strategies dynamically, learners cultivated psychological resilience, which contributes to lifelong adaptability and professional competence in uncertain environments.

3. *Teamwork and Digital Collaboration.* Online platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, and Moodle became not only tools of instruction but also spaces for peer solidarity. Group projects and problem-based learning tasks nurtured communication, negotiation, and leadership skills. Informal learning communities have emerged spontaneously, with students supporting each other emotionally, sharing coping strategies, and exploring ethical dilemmas collaboratively. This co-agency enhances social and moral competence, making the classroom a living space for ethical education. Moreover, collaboration in digital environments promoted intercultural awareness, conflict resolution, and project management skills, simulating real-world professional teamwork scenarios.

4. *Reflective and Critical Thinking.* Journaling, narrative reflection, and dialogue-based assessment encouraged metacognition – the ability to analyze one's thoughts and feelings in uncertain environments. Reflection became both a learning tool and a coping mechanism, supporting emotional resilience and ethical sensitivity. Students



report that reflective practices allow them to integrate personal experiences with professional learning, fostering critical thinking and moral awareness. In addition, narrative exercises helped students develop empathy for patients and colleagues, enhanced decision-making under stress, and improved the ability to evaluate complex situations ethically. This structured reflection creates a habit of continuous self-assessment, which strengthens both personal growth and professional responsibility.

The wartime educational context, though traumatic, paradoxically stimulates the integration of soft skills into the core of academic activity. Traditional lecture-based teaching has proven insufficient to address students' psychological needs. Instead, interactive, dialogical, and reflective methods have gained prominence.

The findings show that students exposed to reflective and collaborative methods demonstrate higher emotional stability and engagement (Table 1).

Table 1 - Transformation of humanistic soft skills under wartime learning conditions

Skill	Pre-war (Mean Score)	Wartime (Mean Score)	Change (%)
Empathy	3.4	4.6	+35%
Adaptability	3.1	4.3	+39%
Critical Thinking	3.8	4.5	+18%
Communication	3.6	4.7	+31%

Author's own development

As the table indicates, empathy and adaptability show the most significant growth, suggesting that the wartime context strongly stimulates affective and behavioral flexibility. Students reported that they learned to “feel before acting,” balancing professional detachment with moral sensitivity.

Another notable finding was the spontaneous emergence of informal learning communities. Students supported each other emotionally, shared coping strategies, and organized peer discussions on ethical and professional dilemmas. Such peer-based support functioned as an implicit curriculum of emotional intelligence. These dynamics illustrate how humanistic approaches can be embedded in digital and hybrid learning



environments, transforming both teaching and learning into spaces for ethical and emotional development.

The pedagogical role of teachers also evolved. Instead of traditional authority figures, educators became facilitators of emotional dialogue and safe spaces for reflection. This shift toward relational pedagogy mirrors global trends in trauma-informed education and aligns with UNESCO's humanistic vision of lifelong learning.

Educators reported that they increasingly view teaching as emotional labor – an act of care and solidarity. Through this lens, humanistic education shifts from being a theoretical paradigm to a practical necessity. The cultivation of soft skills such as empathy and communication not only supports professional competence but also contributes to national resilience.

Moreover, wartime learning has fostered new models of *co-agency* – where students and teachers share responsibility for emotional stability and success. This relational pedagogy aligns with global trends emphasizing education for peace, ethics, and humanity.

Summary and conclusions.

Humanistic education in wartime conditions serves as a foundation for the development of soft skills that are vital for personal and societal recovery. The crisis has revealed that emotional intelligence, adaptability, and empathy are not supplementary competencies but core dimensions of professional and civic identity.

Teaching through hard times transforms educators into mentors of resilience and learners into active participants in meaning-making. Integrating humanistic methods – reflection, dialogue, narrative, and peer support – not only enhances learning outcomes but also strengthens social cohesion.

Future research should focus on institutional strategies for embedding soft skills into curricula through interdisciplinary approaches and digital-humanistic tools. Wartime education, despite its hardships, may become a catalyst for a more compassionate, flexible, and human-centered educational system.



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Анотація. У статті досліджується трансформація вищої освіти в умовах війни з особливим акцентом на розвиток м'яких навичок через гуманістичні педагогічні підходи. Війна докорінно змінила контекст навчання й викладання, висунувши вимоги не лише до академічної стійкості, а й до емоційного інтелекту, адаптивності, емпатії та комунікації. Дослідження висвітлює, як викладачі інтегрують гуманістичні цінності в дистанційні та змішані формати навчання, сприяючи формуванню саморегуляції, співпраці та рефлексивного мислення у здобувачів освіти. Особливу увагу приділено викладанню як формі психологічної підтримки та розбудови спільноти. У статті зроблено висновок, що освіта в умовах війни може стати рушієм переосмислення освітніх парадигм у напрямі більшої гуманізації та моральної сталості.

Ключові слова: м'які навички, гуманістична освіта, навчання в умовах війни, емоційна стійкість, емпатія, вища освіта, педагогічні інновації.