



## Cultural Studies and Soft Skills: An Integrated Approach

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<b>Received:</b>	<b>Abstract</b>
04/08/2024	<p><i>This paper aims to clear a space of critical intervention from within the discursive debates on soft skills by adopting a cultural studies approach and appropriating its precepts to develop what I call "the soft skilling process" which is a life-long experience of learning that denotes a mode of dwelling in a world of globalizing identities and travelling cultures, where identities are understood as being constantly on the move and in a process of becoming, emphasizing the postmodern notion of the creative performativity of identity. Instead of being static capabilities or fixed traits, soft skills must be inscribed within a multidimensional and developmental process in which individuals develop expertise in navigating and negotiating multiple cultural worlds and identities. My point is to shift the traditional focus from employability and professional skills, which is dominant in studies on soft skills, to a humanistic education that promotes cultural awareness, ethical responsibility, and sustainability: Openness to experience, active participatory learning, and biodiversity awareness are the objectives to reach this educational experience. The proposed educational framework aims to develop engineers who are not only technically skilled but also culturally and ethically aware global citizens.</i></p>
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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary education, particularly within engineering programs, the emphasis on soft skills has gained increasing importance. These skills—such as effective communication, leadership, and teamwork—are often integrated into curricula to meet the demands of employability, aiming to enhance the professional capabilities of students. However, this focus on soft skills typically centres on preparing students for the workforce, sometimes overlooking broader dimensions that are equally essential for their overall development.

This paper seeks to address the limitations of this approach by advocating for a more holistic approach to soft skills within the educational framework: drawing on Cultural Studies, it argues that soft skills should not only equip students for professional success but also foster cultural awareness, ethical responsibility, and a commitment to sustainability. By expanding the scope of soft skills to include these aspects, the study aims to redefine what constitutes professional competence in engineering education.

Cultural Studies offers a valuable framework for understanding the fluidity of identities and practices in a globalized world (Young, 2003). This perspective allows for the incorporation of cultural and ethical considerations into the teaching of soft skills, shifting the focus from mere professional competence to the development of culturally and ethically aware global citizens (Sachs, 2015). The study emphasizes the importance of openness to experience, active learning, and sustainability by advocating for the inclusion of specific teaching materials and modules on these topics within engineering curricula. It seeks to reaccentuate the role of soft skills in

education by highlighting the need for a broader, more inclusive approach that incorporates cultural and ethical dimensions into the curriculum.

The analysis and interpretation within this study follow a multi-step process. The first step involves a comprehensive review of existing literature on soft skills to identify key concepts, theories, and debates surrounding the nature, importance, and application of soft skills in engineering programs. Following the literature review, a conceptual analysis is conducted to differentiate between soft skills and soft skilling in order to clarify the boundaries and intersections of these terms, providing a more precise understanding of what constitutes soft skills. The study then draws on insights from Cultural Studies to reframe soft skills within a broader socio-cultural and ethical context. The last step involves integrating cultural awareness, ethical responsibility, and sustainability into the concept of soft skills, thereby expanding their scope and relevance within engineering programs.

Throughout, the study not only explores the current landscape of soft skills but also provides a nuanced interpretation that seeks to enhance their full significance in educational and professional settings.

## **2. Literature Review**

The concept of soft skills has evolved significantly over the past decade, reflecting its growing importance in both personal and professional realms. Almonte (2021) notes that the term "soft skills" has become prominent in discussions across media, business, and academia, illustrating its critical role in complementing technical expertise. Research by Almlund et al. (2011) supports this view, highlighting that soft skills—often considered personality traits—are key predictors of academic and economic success. These skills, which include effective communication, leadership, and teamwork, are essential for navigating complex social and professional environments. Engelberg (2015) further emphasizes the broad scope of soft skills and their impact on personal and career advancement. Cimatti (2016) underscores the necessity of incorporating soft skills into higher education curricula to better prepare students for the evolving demands of the labour market, a sentiment also reflected by Lancaster and Stillman (2010), who argue for a balanced approach that includes both technical and soft skills for ensuring graduates' success.

To broaden the scope of this narrow focus, Cultural Studies, in my view, offers a valuable framework for understanding and developing soft skills because it emphasizes the dynamic nature of cultural practices. This interdisciplinary field, as noted by de Certeau (1984), challenges traditional perspectives by focusing on everyday shifting practices rather than static views, thereby opening the latter to creative and innovative moves. Critical thinking, a cornerstone of Cultural Studies, is essential for navigating this complex landscape. Kakai (2000) describes critical thinking as a broadly applicable process for making informed decisions and solving problems, involving rigorous questioning and analysis of ideas. Cultural Studies fosters critical thinking by encouraging reflective and independent thought, which aligns with the goals of soft skills education to develop individuals capable of engaging with diverse and evolving contexts.

Awareness of cultural differences is another significant aspect of Cultural Studies that can enhance soft skills training as will be shown later. The globalizing world necessitates a deep understanding of cultural diversity and its impact on communication. Young (2003) discusses the importance of adopting a multi-perspectival lens to appreciate and navigate diverse cultural contexts. This perspective supports the development of intercultural competence, which is crucial for effective communication and collaboration in a globalized world. Cultural

competence, I think, involves recognizing and respecting various cultural norms and practices that can help students navigate and connect across cultural divides.

The integration of sustainability and planetary consciousness into soft skills education reflects a growing awareness of environmental and ethical considerations. Barker (2022) explores planetary consciousness as a form of global awareness that emphasizes our interconnectedness with the world. In his view, the duality of human advancement—combining caution with optimism about ecological and technological progress—presents a dilemma that necessitates a focus on sustainable practices and ethical responsibility. By incorporating these principles into soft skills training, educators can prepare students to address global challenges and contribute to sustainable development.

Finally, the practical implications of integrating Cultural Studies with soft skills education are evident in pedagogical approaches. Denney (2005) highlights the role of education in enhancing long-term security and adaptability in a risk society. Engelberg (2015) draws our attention to active and participatory learning methods that foster engagement and development of soft skills by creating dynamic learning environments that encourage collaboration, creativity, and critical reflection. It seems to me that these approaches, informed by Cultural Studies, align to prepare students to navigate complex, diverse, and rapidly changing environments.

### **3. Soft Skilling Instead of Soft Skills**

Over the last ten years, the phrase "soft skills" has started cropping up in public discussions, including the media, business, forums, national and international conferences, and journal publications (Almonte, 2021). Not coincidentally, some scholars in this field build closely on important research undertaken in psychology that investigated valuable skills or "personality traits" by exploring the power of these tendencies/characteristics or attributes as both predictors and causes of academic and economic success (Almlund et al., 2011). Other researchers emphasize the importance of interpersonal or social aptitudes. Soft skills, often viewed as a complement to hard skills—which are defined as the technical abilities to perform specific tasks or professional activities—encompass a range of crucial social competencies. These skills include effective communication, active listening, negotiation, networking, decision-making, and leadership. Unlike hard skills, which are typically associated with specific technical expertise, soft skills are broader in scope and pertain to an individual's ability to interact effectively with others and navigate social environments. This distinction highlights the multifaceted nature of soft skills and their critical role in personal and professional success (Engelberg, 2015).

Soft skills aim to cultivate broad employability competencies, making them crucial for job seekers striving to secure employment and advance within the labor market (Cimatti, 2016). Companies often evaluate new hires, particularly recent graduates, based on their soft skills in addition to their hard skills. This is true even for technical professions such as engineering, where the ability to form effective teams and foster a collaborative work environment is essential for maintaining competitiveness. Consequently, higher education institutions must equip students with both robust technical abilities and well-developed soft skills to ensure their success in the professional world (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010). Jennifer Warner emphasizes the importance of soft skills and describes how one academic program at a four-year institution integrates soft skills training into its curriculum to better prepare its graduates for professional success (Warner, 2021).

Although soft skills are defined differently across various contexts, their primary objective remains to enhance organizational success. However, I believe that success and development in the business world should extend beyond immediate returns and profits. True success should encompass responsibility towards future generations, sustainability, environmental awareness, and a range of human and ethical considerations. Soft skills that enable individuals to navigate their environment effectively, collaborate with others, perform at high levels, and achieve their goals should also address these emerging human concerns and contexts. In my view, this broader focus will not only contribute to the company's success but also to creating a better world. To do so, it is important to integrate the debate on soft skills within the field of Cultural Studies, which is a multidisciplinary body of scholarship on the politics of culture, to shed light on the process of "soft skilling" as a way of seeing and living that represents the art of dwelling in a diverse and shifting world, tracing a larger journey of translation.

#### **4. Defining Cultural Studies**

Broadly speaking, Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary formation that draws on a range of humanities and social sciences fields, investigating culture from different positions and positing that culture is unfinished, always in the process of being produced and reproduced. Cultural studies enact a paradigm shift from culture seen from a panoptical and elevated point of view to culture seen as everyday shifting practices. It is built on the premise that:

The exceptional, indeed cancerous, development of panoptic procedures seems to be indissociable from the historical role to which they have been assigned, that of being a weapon to be used in combatting and controlling heterogeneous practices. The coherence in question is the result of a particular success, and will not be characteristic of all technological practices. Beneath what one might call the "monotheistic" privilege that panoptic apparatuses have won for themselves, a "polytheism" of scattered practices survives, dominated but not erased by the triumphal success of one of their number (De Certeau, 1984, p. 48).

It is within this quiet and organized diversity of procedures that we should seek minor practices, which uniquely exist both within and outside the dominant cultural logic. Another related feature of cultural studies is that it is inscribed within the heterological tradition, in which the discourse about the other aims at prying the spaces of sameness open onto a different discourse—a discourse that is authorized by, and stems from, the other or from heterogeneity. Reflecting on these ideas, I will in what follows focus on four major areas that shouldn't be taken as exterior to one another but as intertwined and overlapping.

##### **4.1. Enhancing Critical Thinking**

This is the spirit of Cultural Studies. It is a prerequisite to survive in this rapidly changing world. There is no universal agreement on the precise definition of this concept. However, most cultural scholars and theorists emphasize that "critical thinking is a broadly applicable process of reaching decisions, judgments, and solutions for problems, all of which are required in dealing with many aspects of our everyday life" (Kakai, 2000, p. 111). Critical thinking involves the ability to think clearly and rationally, understanding the logical connections between ideas. It can be characterized as engaging in reflective and independent thought. Critical thinkers rigorously question ideas and assumptions rather than accepting them at face value. They strive to assess whether ideas, arguments, and findings offer a complete picture and are prepared to discover that they may not. Consequently, critical practitioners systematically identify, analyze, and address problems, rather than relying solely on intuition or instinct. Furthermore, Cultural Studies not only fosters the use of critical thinking skills but

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also enhances their application in morally and ethically desirable ways. The ability to think critically, view situations from various perspectives, and make informed decisions helps develop patience and improves our approach to decision-making, navigating differences, and seeking better solutions.

#### **4.2.Awareness of Cultural Differences**

Awareness of cultural diversity and cultural differences and how they impact successful intercultural communication have been enhanced by a globalizing world. The key to understanding and embracing cultural differences lies in flexibility. Flexibility means being open to the idea that others may hold perspectives different from our own and being willing to accept and appreciate these diverse viewpoints. Diversity awareness involves recognizing and appreciating the myriad ways in which people differ, including but not limited to gender, race, ethnicity, age, physical and mental abilities, language, religious beliefs, education, income, occupation, and geographic location. This broad awareness helps us navigate and communicate effectively across these various divides. By cultivating intercultural awareness and competence, we enhance our ability to connect with others, fostering mutual understanding and respect in an increasingly diverse world.

Cultural Studies helps us look at the other side of the photographs. The phrase is used by Robert Young to describe the need to see that there are multi- perspectival points of view and ways of seeing that are not like ours. In his words,

This book amounts to a kind of photograph album, but not one in which you are just gazing at the image made static and unreal, turned into an object divorced from the whispers of actuality. These are stories from the other side of photographs. Testimonies from the people who are looking at you as you read (Young, 2003, p. 8).

Cultural Studies, then, incorporate some aspects and improve ways of seeing and thinking by developing multidimensionality and multi-perspectival approaches or frameworks. This fosters a sense of flexibility in thinking that is akin to adaptability to new contexts and developing social and emotional competence. Students studying abroad, for instance, will need to learn how to communicate across cultures, embrace diversity and adversity, and learn how to be resilient and enter the unknown with confidence. Being equipped with multi- perspectival and global values makes the journey to the other culture, beyond the confines of home, intriguing and fascinating.

#### **4.3.Sustainable Development**

This label underpins the meanings of a new paradigm in development and progress, that is, a model of development that is ecological and sustainable. In this respect, business should have a sense not just of current and short-term interests but most importantly of long-term and future-inflected projects, especially with regard to future generations. In the current era, many individuals are grappling with profound questions about the world around us, our perception of reality, and our understanding of humanity amid ongoing transformations both externally and internally. Although our responses to these questions vary, a common concern is how humanity is reshaping reality. The exploration of human capabilities has reached a point where it prompts both caution and optimism. On one hand, the ongoing destruction of ecosystems essential for life poses a serious threat to our survival. On the other hand, our advancements in power and intelligence inspire hope and enthusiasm for the future. This duality presents a

significant dilemma: how can we harness our power and intelligence in a way that is sustainable?

It seems that humanity, driven by a survival instinct, is actively seeking methods to prevent obsolescence and advance in a direction that promotes long-term sustainability. However, the path to progress is fraught with challenges and potential risks. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize and strengthen ecological and sustainable awareness, which arises from our intrinsic need to find safer solutions for our continued evolution and survival. By continuously enhancing this awareness through various strategies and practices, we can work towards achieving positive transformations that benefit both our species and the planet.

#### **4.4. Planetary Consciousness**

At its core, planetary consciousness can be understood as a form of global awareness; it is about thinking on a global scale while acting locally. This concept, often summarized by the idea of "thinking globally, acting locally," suggests a deep-seated awareness of our interconnectedness with the world. On a more profound level, planetary consciousness involves an enhanced awareness of the "Living Conscious Universe." Historically, human consciousness has been fragmented, instrumental, and self-divided. To move beyond anthropocentric views, we must adopt a multi-perspectival approach, envisioning ourselves as integral to the Earth's consciousness. This shift could lead to a unified Planetary Consciousness where human activities harmonize with, rather than exploit, the planet's resources.

In other words, we are at a pivotal moment of Planetary Transformation. This transformation calls for an integrated consciousness that aligns with a new form of eco-humanism, which "focuses not only on humans but also on the environment in which they are embedded" (Barker, 2022). Such a consciousness could foster the development of a planetary civilization that supports sustainable human life on Earth. It is possible that by delving deeply into our being—an existence intricately linked with nature—we might uncover insights that guide us in transforming our lives and our species. This transformation could enable us to live in harmony not only with ourselves but also with the natural world that sustains us.

### **5. The Relevance of Cultural Studies to Soft Skills**

Cultural Studies can offer learners a number of skills that are integral to its interdisciplinary vision. It teaches the ability to interrogate reading materials, the ability to analyze them closely, and the desire to contextualize, that is, to further consider other social and cultural fields, all of which equip the learner with the critical tools that can be important in inculcating not only technical or textual but also cultural competencies in our students and helping them accrue critical thinking, by tailoring their instruction so closely to the burning issues of our times. Using Cultural Studies as an approach entails specifically:

#### **5.1. Openness to Experience**

Openness to experience refers to the willingness to embrace new aesthetic, cultural, or intellectual experiences. This trait fosters imagination, creativity, enthusiasm, and curiosity, encouraging individuals to explore and engage with diverse perspectives. In educational settings, promoting openness helps students develop an unconventional approach to thinking and problem-solving (McCrae & Costa, 1997). It is also crucial for adapting to new and evolving environments, as it enhances flexibility and adaptability.

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Integrating openness into the curriculum involves exposing students to various perspectives and experiences beyond traditional classroom learning. This approach aligns with the notion that education in a risk society equips students with credentials that offer long-term security and adaptability in an uncertain job market (Denney, 2005). By fostering openness, educational programs prepare students to navigate complex and dynamic contexts effectively.

#### **5.2.Active and Participatory Learning**

Active and participatory learning shifts the focus from traditional, top-down teaching methods to a more dynamic and interactive educational experience. This approach views the classroom as a collaborative space where learning emerges from the interaction between teachers, students, and materials (Brusilovsky & Millán, 2007). It emphasizes the importance of student engagement and active participation in the learning process.

Incorporating participatory learning involves more than just fostering teamwork and collaboration; it also integrates students' digital tech-savviness into their educational experience. The rise of digital technology enables students to engage with participatory cultures and leverage online resources for collaborative learning (Jenkins, 2009). This modern approach enhances students' ability to interact with and adapt to a rapidly changing world.

#### **5.3.Awareness of Biodiversity**

Understanding biodiversity is crucial for developing well-rounded global citizens. Biodiversity encompasses the variety of life on Earth, including species, ecosystems, and genetic diversity, and plays a critical role in maintaining the health and stability of our planet (Tilman et al., 2017). Incorporating biodiversity into education helps students appreciate the complex interconnections within ecosystems and understand how human activities impact these systems. This broader perspective enables students to make informed decisions that consider both human and environmental needs (Chapin et al., 2000).

Educating students about biodiversity enhances their ability to engage as informed global citizens. In a world where environmental challenges like climate change and habitat loss are increasingly pressing, understanding these issues from a biodiversity perspective prepares students to tackle global problems effectively (Cardinale et al., 2012). This knowledge fosters flexibility and adaptability, allowing students to navigate the evolving global landscape and respond to social, political, and economic changes with greater resilience (Gibson et al., 2011).

Moreover, integrating biodiversity awareness into education promotes sustainable practices. Students who grasp the importance of diverse ecosystems are more likely to advocate for and implement solutions that protect the environment (Noss, 1990). This includes supporting conservation efforts and making environmentally conscious decisions in their personal and professional lives. By emphasizing sustainable development, educational programs can instill a sense of responsibility towards future generations and the planet (Miller, 2011).

Awareness of biodiversity also fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills. By analyzing the interactions within ecosystems and the consequences of human actions, students develop the ability to address environmental challenges innovatively (Folke et al., 2004). This critical approach is applicable across various fields, enhancing students' capacity to create effective solutions for both immediate and long-term issues.

Overall, integrating biodiversity into education provides a comprehensive foundation that combines ecological, social, and ethical considerations. This holistic approach not only

supports personal development but also prepares students to contribute positively to a global society. By understanding the broader implications of their actions, students are better equipped to drive meaningful change and address the complex challenges of our rapidly evolving world (Díaz et al., 2019).

#### **5.4.Sustainability**

Integrating sustainability into education is essential for preparing students to address contemporary environmental and ethical challenges. Sustainability in education involves equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to balance economic, social, and environmental considerations, ensuring that development meets present needs without compromising future generations (Sachs, 2015). Training students should not only focus on technical proficiency but also incorporate soft skills that emphasize long-term ecological responsibility and ethical decision-making.

Taking the case of engineering education, a key aspect of sustainability education is fostering an understanding of how engineering practices impact the environment and society. By incorporating principles of sustainable development into the curriculum, students learn to evaluate the environmental footprint of their projects and design solutions that minimize ecological damage (Elkington, 1997). This approach helps students develop a holistic view of their work, aligning their professional practices with broader sustainability goals.

Additionally, educating engineers about sustainability involves instilling a sense of responsibility towards future generations. This perspective encourages students to consider the long-term consequences of their actions and adopt practices that support ecological balance and resource conservation (Boulanger & Brechet, 2005). By emphasizing sustainability, educational programs can foster a mindset that values not only immediate technical outcomes but also the enduring health of our planet.

Incorporating sustainability into engineering education also enhances students' ability to innovate. When engineers are trained to think sustainably, they are more likely to create solutions that address environmental and social challenges while advancing technological progress (Holling, 2001). This integrated approach ensures that engineering practices contribute positively to both current and future societal needs.

Overall, embedding sustainability into engineering training provides students with a comprehensive framework for responsible practice. This approach not only improves their technical skills but also prepares them to contribute meaningfully to global sustainability efforts, ultimately fostering a more ethical and environmentally conscious generation of engineers (Meadows et al., 1972).

#### **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the integration of soft skills training into university curricula, especially for engineering students, should be informed by principles from Cultural Studies. This approach transcends traditional objectives of improving employability and professional skills, focusing instead on cultivating a more holistic and ethically informed education. Cultural Studies provides a framework for understanding how knowledge and skills can be developed and applied in culturally and ethically meaningful ways. By embedding these insights into educational practices, we can equip students not only with technical expertise but also with a profound awareness of cultural dynamics and ethical considerations. This dual emphasis on technical proficiency and cultural sensitivity will better prepare students to engage thoughtfully



and responsibly in their professional and personal endeavours, ultimately contributing to a more empathetic and ethically aware society.

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