

Teaching Soft Skills to Students of Humanities: A Cultural Perspective

Mounir Sanhaji

Faculty of Languages, Arts and Humanities, Ibn Zohr University, Agadir, Morocco

m.sanhaji@uiz.ac.ma

Abstract

Teaching soft skills to higher education students is an essential step towards the integration of their competence into the workplace context. However, the nature of the curriculum students of humanities have questions its efficiency to help them acquire these essential skills. In this context, this paper explores the role of teaching “Introduction to Cultural Studies,” as a case study, to the students of the English Department. Undeniably, Soft skills are referred to as transferrable skills that can be acquired via the experience of employers. Still, many graduates do not have the same opportunity to have adequate experience that can qualify them to have a job in the first place. In this sense, this examines to what extent the assigned curriculum of the English Department can prepare a student for a productive integration into the job market.

Keywords: Soft Skill, Students of Humanities, Cultural Studies, Job Market

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/14-30-02

Publication date: October 31st 2023

1. Introduction

“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” (John Dewey 1938) Great teachers are those who set up the nexus between the subjects they are teaching and their students’ real life to “connect their internal processes with their external realities.” (Hubbs & Brand 2005) The problem encountered while discussing this linkage between education and the job market is the skills students may acquire in “professional education” compared to “non-professional education”. Professional education, like engineering, is already “designed to meet the needs of a particular occupation so that all students in these programmes acquire the necessary skills throughout their studies to perform their day-to-day job responsibilities effectively.” (Naseem & Fleming 2018) Training provided in such a professional education allows students to engage with their future workplace (Naseem & Fleming 2018). This opportunity builds, in one way or another, students’ skills as independent learners, including their ability to think critically, an important employability skill (Allen et al. 2011). This way, students learn to think strategically and make use of their knowledge and theories of their subjects. For example, medical students could be exposed to real patient cases to improve their clinical cognitive skills On the other hand, “non-professional education offers very limited opportunities for students to experience the real world during their degree time.” (Naseem & Fleming 2018)

2. Integrating Soft Skills into Academia:

Regardless of the nature of the subject, a good teaching approach always finds real-life examples to explain the complex issues they are dealing with as a way to make the learning process more understandable and meaningful. For example, while teaching physics or biology, teachers can simulate a real-life experience. In mathematics’ case, teachers can give students a tangible problem to solve. In history, providing students with examples from current events can be a great option, etc. In the same stream, this paper discusses how teachers of humanities, as non-professional education, can provide students with this opportunity and help them enhance their capabilities to interact with the outside world by acquiring the essential skills needed in the workplace. In other words, this paper tries to explore the extent to which Soft Skills, such as communication, work ethic, critical thinking, and a positive attitude can be implemented and taught implicitly to students of the English Department and how the assigned curriculum, such as “Introduction to Cultural Studies”, can prepare them for a productive integration in the job market.

3. Cultural Studies and Observation Skill:

“Introduction to Cultural Studies” is a course that students of the English Department have in their second year. Its focus is to initiate students in understanding concepts of culture, discourse, and power, among others. One of the lessons students can learn from the cultural studies course is communication. Communication, which is an essential concept in soft skills, is introduced to students of cultural studies as a process of making meaning. It is how one individual conveys meaning to another individual. For example, when a man knocks on a door, the sound is a sign of the person behind that door. When a person is wearing a T-shirt, this conveys meaning to the observer that he supports, for instance, a particular soccer team.

In this sense, the “Introduction to Cultural Studies” course urges students to transfer meaning to these

actions, behaviors, and objects that can be referred to as “cultural texts” that reveal cultural information. Moreover, this course instructs students that the meaning of a message can be determined by many different social factors, such as the context of the message, the form it takes, and the power relations between the ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’. It instructs them likewise that meaning, according to Semiotics, is not straightforward or ‘natural’; but rather that there is an arbitrary relationship between a signifier and the signified (Saussure, 1974). “Cultural studies” emphasizes that to understand a particular element we need to study the whole system of relationships or structure.

At this point, students can develop, in one way or another, some skills that are essential in their workplace, such as “observation skills”. This skill is defined as “the ability to use all five of your senses to recognize, analyze and recall your surroundings. This practice encourages you to be present and aware of the details of your daily life.” (Indeed Editorial Team, 2022) Observation skills are dependent on several other abilities and attributes, such as communication, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and attention to detail. By observing life and paying attention to details, employers can gain a better understanding of how things work. Employers can learn a lot by observing what other people are doing in their work. They can see how people interact, how their bosses work, and what results in a reward or a punishment. In this sense, an employer may be able to examine how people express themselves through clothing, what language they use, how they reach their goals, and how they define success.

4. Shaping Attitudes and Everyday life:

Another lesson introduced to students of “cultural studies” is media. Media is presented to students as the outlet that affects people’s attitudes, shapes their daily life, and redefines, the meaning of, e.g. happiness and success. To study media, one has to study its audience. Every media text/discourse is made with an audience in mind; it is necessary to think about how the viewers are expected to interpret and react to it. For instance, if the content of media discourse is an ad, will they buy the product? If it is a title sequence, will they keep watching? Etc. In the same stream, analyzing clients in the marketplace, or what is referred to as the skill of “customer analysis”, which helps employers identify target customers, determine their needs, and identify how products meet those needs.

Apart from audience, media language is another media concept that refers to the techniques used to communicate meaning in the production work. In other words, it is how media communicates to the audience. The reader has to encode different types of media messages, be it (captions for photographs), verbal (how the language is delivered), non-verbal (gestures and actions), visual (what is on the screen), and aural (sound). Here, students are introduced to Stuart Hall’s process of “encoding and decoding” which reflects how media messages are produced, circulated, and consumed by the audience. To be able to decode the message of media language, it is important to understand the mediations that contribute to the construction/ representation of media discourses and realities. Mediation refers to how a representation is put together to direct the audience toward a desired outcome/meaning. The camera angle is a perfect example of this mediation that its position can affect the production of meaning.

In the same stream, taking different positionalities/ different camera angles to understand customers’ needs, especially their psychological needs, is an essential part of any business. Physical needs could be easy to identify, but psychological needs are somehow harder to identify. The key to understanding the customers’ psychological needs is to have different camera angles to direct them toward the products that provide them with a specific feeling, especially since every customer has a specific psychological need.

5. Conclusion

Generally, the course “Cultural Studies” helps students understand the complexity of everyday life and the way that habits, texts, objects, and beliefs are socially patterned and laden with values and meanings (Sydney University, 2022). It provides students with a range of tools to analyze how cultural practices and meanings are produced, circulated, and exchanged. These tools are essential to acquiring different soft skills that people may need in their workplace. Soft skills are becoming increasingly significant as a result of the increasing number of students lacking these skills as they enter the workforce. Employers are looking for candidates with good soft skills, and it is the role of teachers to introduce students to acquire, at least, some of these skills. The idea is that regardless of the major being taught to students; teachers have to think of linking their courses to everyday life to encourage students to improve, intentionally or even unintentionally, their soft skills. Thus, there would be no need for a specific course named “Soft Skills” if a teacher observes himself or herself as a coach and rethinks the popular/traditional educational paradigm. Richard Remedios states in his article “The role of soft skills in employability”, “Educators have a special responsibility regarding soft skills because during students’ School and University time they have a major impact on the development of their students’ soft skills.” (Remedios, 2012)

References:

- Cultural Studies. (2022, April 12). The University of Sydney. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/courses/subject-areas/major/cultural-studies1.html>
- Cultural Studies. (2022, April 12). The University of Sydney. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/courses/subject-areas/major/cultural-studies1.html>
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education* (Vol. no. 10). New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Indeed Editorial Team. (2020, September 25) *Observation Skills: Definition and Examples* <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-cover-letters/observation-skills>
- Naseem, J., & Fleming, L. (2018). Connecting graduates with the real world: Transferring research-based. In V. C. Tong, A. Standen, & M. Sotiriou, *Shaping Higher Education with Students* (pp. 224-241). London: UCL Press.
- Remedios, R. (2012). The Role of Soft Skills in Employability. *International journal of management research and reviews*, 2 (7), 1285.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de ([1916] 1974): *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Wade Baskin). London: Fontana/Collins