

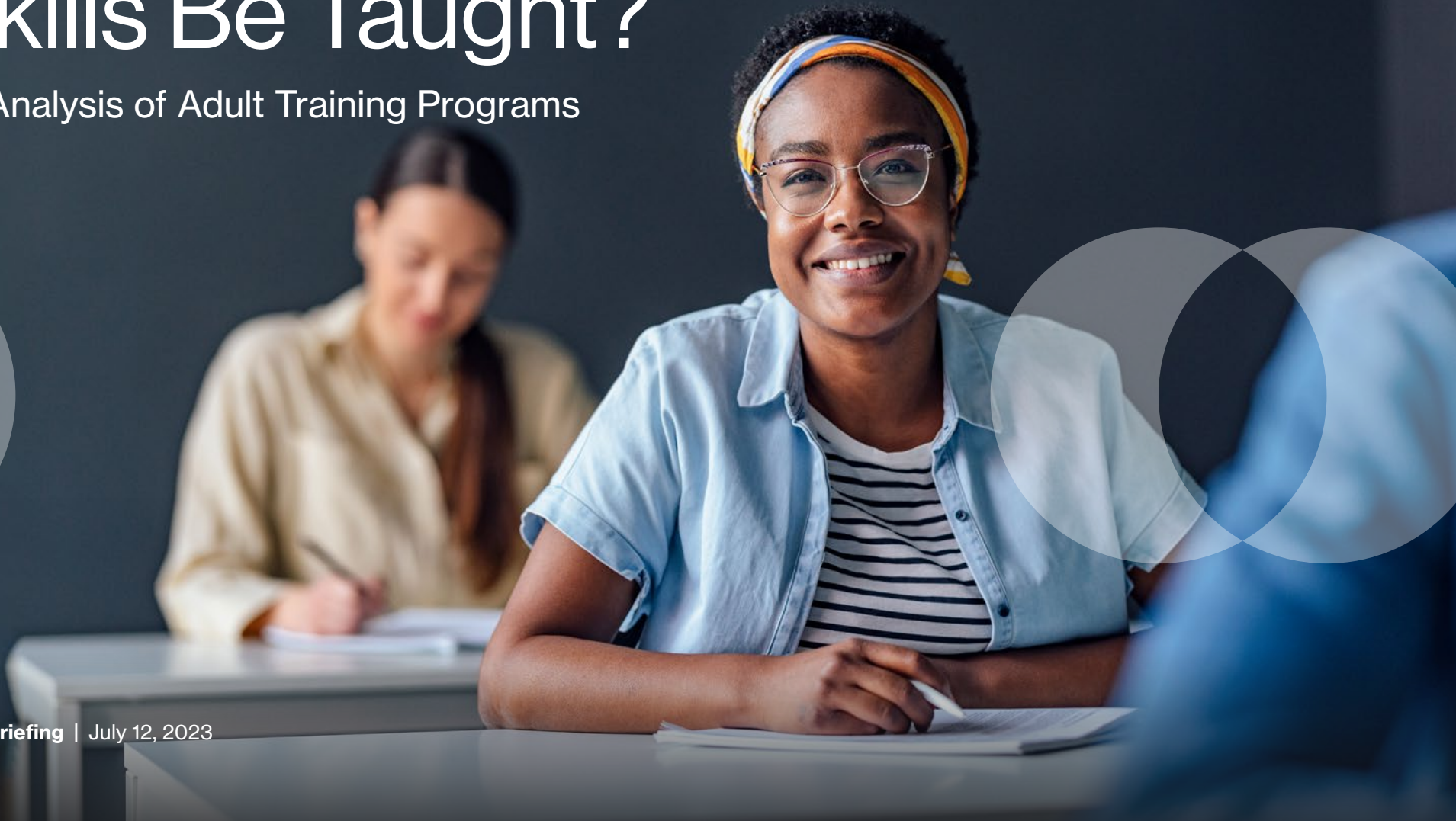
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Can Social and Emotional Skills Be Taught?

An Analysis of Adult Training Programs





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Key findings

- While social and emotional skills (SES) can be taught in a college classroom setting, there are significant barriers that can get in the way. Challenges include ambiguous definitions of SES, limited inclusion of these skills in curricula, rigid teaching contexts and strategies, and online learning.
- There's little consensus among researchers and practitioners on how to best define and measure SES in the classroom. This can cause confusion—it's tough for instructors to teach and evaluate, and students to learn, without a clear skills taxonomy.
- For SES to be effectively learned, instructors and students need to acknowledge diverse SES strengths. Recognizing that there are different ways of expressing these skills is important for students to feel that their skillsets are equally represented and valued. Students should feel empowered to explore different viewpoints, question traditional forms of knowledge, and share their unique experiences.
- Many instructors and students said that engaging in new, potentially uncomfortable, experiential learning situations is an effective way for students to reflect on and develop SES. When students apply what they've learned in their program in an unfamiliar environment, they see the value of their skills and gain confidence in their ability to succeed in the labour market.
- Connection and communication are key to teaching and learning SES. Instructors and students said that both are more difficult to facilitate online. In missing face-to-face interactions, instructors struggle to connect with students and engage them in course content. Students lose out on critical learning opportunities like meeting people from different backgrounds, engaging with their instructor, and extracurricular activities.



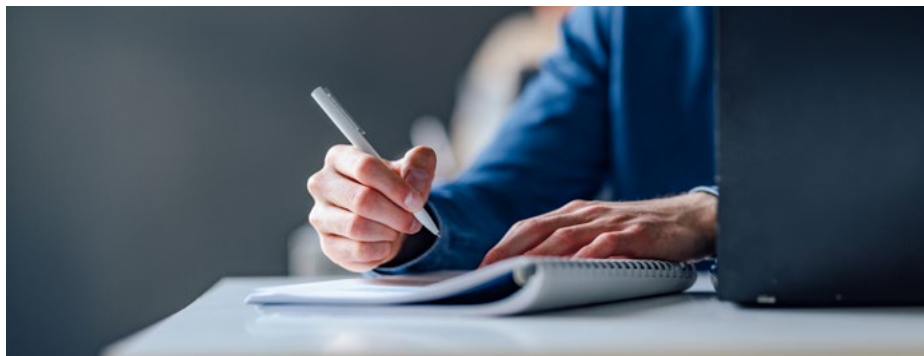
Introduction

Post-secondary institutions (PSIs) have an important role in developing social and emotional skills (SES). But can these skills be taught? SES – sometimes called, soft, people, or human skills – are critical for career and life success.¹ SES include skills such as active listening, empathy, communication, collaboration, and resilience. These skills are in high demand by employers, despite the ongoing digitization in workplaces.

From December 2021 to April 2022, we interviewed 40 college instructors and 25 college students across Canada to ask about participants' experiences teaching, learning, and evaluating SES, which approaches worked best, and where improvements can be made. The similarities and differences between instructors' and students' responses can help us understand the opportunities and challenges of developing SES in college classrooms. For more information on our methodology, see Appendix A.

We found that, while social and emotional skills can be taught in a college setting, there are significant barriers to effectively teaching and learning them. Challenges include ambiguous definitions, limited inclusion of them in curricula, rigid teaching contexts and strategies, and the isolation of online learning. Based on our findings, this issue briefing provides recommendations for education leaders and policy-makers with the following suggestions to help enhance SES teaching and learning:

- establish clear definitions of these skills
- help instructors learn how best to teach them
- integrate SES into the curriculum
- provide practical out-of-classroom experiences to practise
- value SES among diverse students
- create strategic partnerships with employers



1 Giammarco, Higham, and McKean, *The Future Is Social and Emotional*.



Unclear definitions

Our findings echo the literature,² with students and instructors agreeing that although social and emotional skills are crucial to success in the workplace, unclear definitions can get in the way of teaching, learning, and evaluating these skills at the college level. Many participants from both interview groups indicated that the use of different terms can be confusing, misleading, and/or loaded, and can make it tough to have these skills clearly included in curricula.³ Without this, SES learning happens as an implicit outcome of a course, rather than an explicit learning objective.

However, many instructors indicated that the landscape is shifting. Almost half of all instructors felt that the college where they taught valued social and emotional skills. They stated that administrators actively communicated the importance of these skills to staff, faculty, and students through townhall discussions, webinars, and training for instructors.

Almost universally, students said strong SES are important for success, both in the classroom and for the future of work. But when these skills are not explicitly defined as a component of the curriculum, students struggle to reflect on their experiences learning social and emotional skills. Although some were optimistic that the SES learned indirectly through groupwork or presentations will be helpful in their current jobs or future careers, it's only speculation. They typically couldn't clearly attribute their SES progress as a direct outcome of their course.

Not having explicit and consistent definitions of social and emotional skills or tangible course and program outcomes for these skills makes them more difficult for instructors to teach and for students to learn.

² Muñiz, "Muddy Sensemaking."

³ Participant interview.

Teaching SES is possible

Even though most instructors and students agreed that there are challenges in the teaching and learning of SES, both groups were mostly optimistic that training at the college level can help students acquire these skills.

Over half of all students reported that their skills are improved when a college course includes learning outcomes and evaluations of social and emotional skills. But even with success learning them in the classroom, students believed there's a lot that they've yet to master. Most students self-rated their SES as average (rating of 5–7 on a scale of 1–10) and said that skills such as empathy, communication, and active listening are still developing.

Most instructors agreed that teaching these skills in the college classroom is possible. Instructors acknowledged that students' SES varies by cohort, but overall, they rated students' social and emotional skills as high (rating of 8–10 on a scale of 1–10), with collaboration, communication, and active listening emerging as standout skills. Instructors said that students who are older and/or have gained life experience tend to have stronger SES, as these skills can be learned through activities like playing sports, volunteering, and working.

Skills that instructors said students need improvement on include written communication (e.g., writing e-mails), oral communication (e.g., confidence to speak up in class), and resilience (e.g., adaptability when faced with change).

Some students said their college courses could have been improved by having an instructor who was more knowledgeable about these skills and taught them in a more explicit, intentional way. We heard that, although instructors may have strong social and emotional skills—like teamwork, problem-solving, communication, and empathy—that doesn't mean they are equipped to teach these skills.

While instructors may not always feel prepared to teach SES, some did feel comfortable taking it on. Other instructors said they “just try to survive,”⁴ make their way through teaching these skills, and hope for the best. Whether instructors felt comfortable teaching social and emotional skills or were just making their way through it, they expressed a desire for more training and experience to enable them to effectively teach them.

4 Participant interview.

Context and delivery matter

Some instructors and students said that the most successful SES development happens when students are put into new and uncomfortable situations, where they must adapt to unfamiliar circumstances. The classroom offers a great opportunity to learn these skills because it's a safe space for failure, to practise with guidance and feedback.⁵ A few instructors and students provided examples of new and uncomfortable contexts ripe for learning SES in the classroom, including group work with different people, public speaking, and mock interviews.



Some also said that teaching these skills beyond the classroom using work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities, like co-ops at local businesses and community-based approaches where students interact with local organizations, is a good way to learn SES. WIL can help students apply their knowledge in tangible contexts and see the connections between the classroom, workplace, and possibly, their everyday life.

Almost all students agreed that an enthusiastic and committed instructor who clearly cares about their students' success is vital for effectively teaching and learning social and emotional skills. According to one student: "It's the instructor who leaves the mark."⁶ Students can sense when an instructor is disengaged and is just going through the motions.⁷

When reflecting on learning moments, students said that instructors have the greatest impact when they teach beyond the textbook. Students expressed that the best SES learning happens when instructors make a genuine effort to get to know their students and their needs, encourage students to engage with their peers in group work and extracurricular activities, and support students in seeking knowledge and asking questions. One student said that without an emphasis on personal connection, the classroom experience is wash, rinse, repeat—or study, get marks, forget.⁸

5 Participant interview.

6 Participant interview.

7 Participant interview.

8 Participant interview.

Mirroring the literature,⁹ most instructors and students reported that it's harder to create opportunities for optimal SES learning online. "Zoom fatigue is real," and there's only so much that you can learn online.¹⁰ Working through questions about course content, engaging in interactive discussions, and having meaningful check-ins seem to have more impact when done in-person, according to most instructors and students. Some instructors went so far as to say that virtual learning prevents students from receiving a fulsome learning experience (i.e., one that provides ample opportunities for social and emotional learning and development).

Some students also shared that, when in-person classes resumed, they experienced challenges learning these skills because they lost out on important practice during their colleges' pivot to online learning. These students said they lost practice connecting, communicating, and empathizing with others. Other studies also found that students' SES suffered during the pandemic because of the loss of in-person connection.¹¹ Many instructors also acknowledged the negative impacts that the pandemic closures had on students' social and emotional skills development.

9 Talavera and Perez-Gonzalez, "Training in Socio-emotional Skills Through On-Site Training."

10 Participant interview.

11 Leslie, "Facilitation Fundamentals."



Diverse SES

According to most students and instructors, the college classroom can be a useful place not only to hone SES, but also to learn about the diverse ways in which people view and express these skills. Understandings of diversity in social and emotional skills is especially important when preparing students for the workforce, where colleagues and leaders may possess or place emphasis on different SES. Central to this is instructors' knowledge of and comfort with teaching how factors like culture and/or racial identity impact SES expression, recognition, and evaluation.

Most instructors and students agreed that celebrating and exploring different views of social and emotional skills are important to this learning process. A few participants from both population groups shared examples of the value of interacting with students of different backgrounds to learn about diversity in these skills.

For instance, one student shared that her college instructor assigned a virtual culture exchange. This assignment had students plan an itinerary for visiting a different country and required them to learn about the country's cultural norms and try food from different cultures in a virtual group setting. This exercise increased what one student calls "cultural intelligence"¹² – or the understanding of different cultural mannerisms and communication styles. Experiential exercises like this help students to grow certain SES, such as cultural competency, empathy, and communication. It can also help them to think beyond their personal understandings and appreciate the diversity in expressions and perceptions of these skills.

Some instructors said that creating activities that allow students to reflect on their peers' life experiences and exposing students to non-Western-centric curricula can help develop social and emotional skills. In this, both the instructor and the student learn from each other and gain more understanding of how others develop, express, and value these skills.



12 Participant interview.

Recommendations

Findings from our research show that, although SES can be taught in a college setting, there are barriers that prevent instructors from effectively teaching these skills and challenges that affect students' ability to learn them. But there are ways for post-secondary leaders and policy-makers to help students better learn these skills and be prepared for the future of work.

Clear definitions

Instructors and students overwhelmingly said that a clear definition of SES is needed. Defining the term and providing clear information across PSIs about the related competencies can make teaching, learning, and evaluation easier.

For instance, we suggest that social and emotional skills is a catch-all term.¹³ SES can be defined as one's ability to read and manage emotions, regulate behaviour, and build relationships.^{14,15} Examples include active listening, leadership, cultural competence, problem-solving, resiliency, collaboration, and communication.¹⁶

¹³ Giammarco, Higham, and McKean, *The Future Is Social and Emotional*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Conference Board of Canada, The, *The Employability Skills Toolkit*.

¹⁶ Giammarco, Higham, and McKean, *The Future Is Social and Emotional*.

Training for the trainer

Institutions can implement practices that better support instructors in teaching social and emotional skills, which could include clear expectations for teaching these skills, equal emphasis on them across disciplines, and standardized SES training for instructors. Support for instructors can come from workshops, internal training courses, peer discussion groups, and annual check-ins with college administrators regarding the PSI's focus on SES.

Explicitly integrate SES into the curriculum

Although these skills can be taught, students often have difficulty articulating their SES strengths because they are not clearly outlined as course or program outcomes. Students need to understand the skills they are developing through their studies and how those skills apply to industry roles to help them reflect on possible career paths.

This could be done by integrating social and emotional skills into the syllabus, clearly demonstrating how each assignment develops these skills, and showing how they are relevant to their marketability as job seekers.



Outside of the classroom

In addition to creating clear rubrics and evaluations for teaching and assessing SES in the classroom, PSIs can also integrate community-based learning and out-of-classroom experiences to ingrain social and emotional skills learning in a practical context. This can be done by incorporating hands-on, collaborative approaches to teaching these skills in co-op placements or volunteer opportunities, which can help students gain tangible SES experiences and be better prepared for the job market.

Value SES among diverse students

A diversity lens is especially important when teaching and evaluating social and emotional skills. Factors like someone's background and culture may influence how people express these skills or value different ones. Given the variety in SES expressions and perceptions, it is critical to ensure that there is diversity (e.g., racial, gender, cultural) among instructors and that they are trained to support social and emotional skills development in a way that recognizes and empowers diversity.

Create strategic partnerships

The social and emotional skills employers need college grads to have may vary based on occupation, industry, or sector. To be responsive to these different needs, colleges can benefit from strategic partnerships with industry to ensure their programming and curricula prepare students with the social and emotional skills required for long-term employment. These partnerships can include regular meetings that allow employers to provide insights into the SES most needed and where grads may be falling short when it comes to these skills. These interactions can allow colleges to regularly assess the effectiveness of their SES teaching and learning and tailor their learning experiences to optimize student success in the job market.

Additionally, colleges could partner with employers to create work-integrated learning experiences for students to develop their social and emotional skills. This would not only allow students the out-of-the-classroom learning helpful for developing these skills, but may also fill the talent pipeline by creating connections between employers and job seekers with the right mix of SES.

Appendix A

Methodology

A Research Advisory Board composed of academics, skills development experts, and a public policy leader provided advice and feedback throughout the research process. The research design and protocols were reviewed and approved by Veritas, a third-party ethics review organization.

Research questions

- How are social and emotional skills taught in adult learning programs?
- What elements of social and emotional skills programs are more effective than others?
- What are the barriers to delivering social and emotional skills in adult learning settings?

Sample

We interviewed a total of 65 participants—40 college instructors and 25 college students—across Canada and asked them about their experiences teaching and learning SES. College instructors and students were recruited because colleges offered low-barrier, practice-based programming, which is generally less expensive and consuming than university programs.

To support recruitment, we partnered with three Canadian colleges (George Brown College, Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, and Assiniboine Community College), which allowed us access to appropriate listservs and internal communications to promote participation. While we obtained ethics approval from Veritas (a third-party ethics review organization), we also obtained ethics approval from each college with which we partnered. In addition to recruiting instructors and students through the partnering colleges, we also used snowball and convenience sampling to recruit participants from other public colleges across Canada. Private career colleges were not included in this sample.

Eligibility for participation included:

- Having been a student or instructor at a college in Canada in the past two years.
- Having taught or taken a course in the last two years in communications, English, business, leadership, career/professional development, college preparation, or essential skills (which includes courses that teach college preparation or college readiness skills such as communication, collaboration, leadership, active listening, etc.).

Table 1

Breakdown of participants
(count)

Province	Instructors	Students
Alberta	15	8
British Columbia	6	6
Manitoba	7	1
New Brunswick	0	4
Nova Scotia	5	0
Ontario	7	5
Not mentioned	0	1
Total	40	25

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Sample interview questions

Instructors

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your professional journey?
- Are there some social and emotional skills you find more important than others?
- What teaching techniques have you used to teach these skills?
- Do you feel prepared to teach SES? Why or why not?
- What assessment techniques do you use to evaluate these skills?

Students

- Are there some SES you find more important than others?
- Have any courses you have taken included explicit instruction of one or more of these skills?
- What makes an instructor good at teaching social and emotional skills?
- What are the factors that best support your SES development in the college classroom?
- Are there any barriers to being able to develop your social and emotional skills in the college classroom? If so, can you describe them?

Analyses

Sixty-five interviews were recorded and transcribed into text. This text was coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Coding themes were first developed based on the research questions and literature review, followed by an exploratory examination within interviews. Iterative inter-rater reliability tests were run to ensure coding was consistent across researchers. Themes were examined based on how frequently they were noted, as well as the intensity of the observation. Similarities and differences between instructors and students were reported when a significant percentage (i.e., 20 per cent) or more noted a theme.

Limitations

Both population groups for the interviews had a small sample. Given this, we cannot generalize to a larger group based on sample size.



Appendix B

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