

## **What is Employability?: reflecting on the postmodern challenges of work-based learning**

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What is Employability? Yorke and Knight (2004 a) suggest that it is:

a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the community and the economy

They offer further options in their subsequent publication (2004 b), where they suggest that employability is also:

Getting a (graduate) job (...) a consequence of ‘having’ key skills (...) a likely effect of having had good work experience (...) a mix of cognitive and non-cognitive achievements and representations.

Employability is clearly a complex mixture of elements; these elements may differ from job to job but the basic outcome is the same – they make a person a useful, and therefore, desirable employee. In a rapidly changing society it is also clear that employees need to be adaptable and multi-faceted. It is unlikely that 21<sup>st</sup> century workers will hold one position, or even one occupation, for their working lives. They will work for longer than previous generations and perhaps in changing circumstances - this need for re-invention requires a receptive and self-aware person and employability skills need to be honed and enhanced by employees and students of all ages, not just young undergraduates.

When asked what they value in graduate employees it is interesting that employers usually mention traits such as confidence, communication skills, empathy and negotiation skills before subject specialisms (Yorke & Knight, 2004 b). These kinds of strengths can be fostered in different ways, some of which are discussed later. The qualities needed to function well at work can be sub-divided into several categories. Knight and Yorke (2004 p.27) suggest the following:

- A. Personal Qualities, such as self-confidence and self-awareness
- B. Core Skills, such as numeracy and language skills, and
- C. Process Skills, such as problem solving and team working.

Kubler & Forbes (2005 p.3) break down the three categories further into: ‘cognitive skills; generic competencies; personal capabilities; technical ability; business and/or organisation awareness; practical & professional elements’ as competencies that the Council for Industry and Higher Education feel will aid recruitment as they offer a framework against which to judge applicants. There are many elements here other than ‘subject’.

Increasingly Government agendas are making clear links between Higher Education level qualifications and the productivity and profitability of the UK, ‘Human capital

directly increases productivity by raising the productive potential of employees' (HM treasury, 2000, p.26., also Leitch Review 2006; Rammell 2007). This puts growing pressure upon those professionals involved in the development and delivery of HE level learning to adequately develop the UK workforce (future and present) – especially in certain subject areas. Whilst in some science and technology based disciplines it is obvious that the knowledge being transferred may be immediately relevant to the world or work with other 'softer' subjects it is not so unambiguous. Boundaries between disciplines appear to be clear, but if postmodern times have taught us anything it is that boundaries are permeable and fluid, due to the multiple small narratives which co-exist. There are inevitably areas where all disciplines overlap and even offer similar skills, be it, sometimes, in a very different way. Regardless of subject area it has always been posited that there is something about 'graduate-ness' that guarantees that graduates are fit for the world of work; the level and intensity at which they have studied and been tested and assessed is supposed to prove something. Along with their subject-specific knowledge graduates also gain generic skills which cross all disciplines. These might include: coping with competition; undertaking and sometimes managing team-work; arguing convincingly; providing evidence; operating autonomously; spelling correctly; communicating effectively; project management; research skills; relating theory to practice; and so on. J. Brennan et al (2001) found that UK graduates valued the following as employability skills: working under pressure; oral communication skills; accuracy; time management; adaptability; initiative; independent working skills; team working skills; taking responsibility and organisational skills. Sometimes programmes of study make these skills explicit, often however they are left to float in the margins of what the module is about.

Humanities subjects are typically viewed as disciplines which offer softer, generic skills; this leads to the subsequent qualifications being classed as less vocational. Jean Francois Lyotard's writings claim that literature and art, classic humanities subjects, are closely aligned with the multiplicity and lack of linearity of postmodernism, 'The artist and the writer are working without rules to formulate what *will have been done*... Work and text have the character of an event... they always come too late for their author... their being put into work, their realisation (*mise en oeuvre*) always begin too soon' (Lyotard 1984 p.1). Postmodern theory suggests that the future is 'always already experienced'. This is exemplified by writers and artists as their work is continuously formed before, after, and during their creative process. The fragmented, non-linear nature of life flows from the complexity of many little narratives, all open to interpretation and discussion, not closed and dogmatic, these multiple versions offer artists and writers experiences and inspiration. So although humanities qualifications are viewed as non-vocational the reality is that the skills humanities students have are the most useful of all, as they allow you to articulate what it is you know or think. Also the kind of texts a typical, for example, English literature student will study encourage the reader to examine ideas about identity, gender relations, politics, culture, citizenship, social justice and so on – as Kubler and Forbes (2005 p.12) suggest:

The study of English develops a flexible and responsive openness of mind, conceptual sophistication in argument, and the ability to engage in dialogue with past and present cultures and values (...) All English graduates are expected to be aware of the production and determination of meaning by

historical, social, political, stylistic, ethnic, gender, geographical and other contexts.

These strengths and attributes are of equal relevance in ensuring that the UK develops in a useful and productive way as are those ‘learned’ by studying maths or physics, for example. One discipline should not be viewed in a hierarchy against any other; they can be equally important whilst remaining very different. Postmodernism is often claimed, perhaps most famously by Lyotard, to signal the inadequacy of, and the subsequent moving away from, ‘grand narratives’, forms of representation aligned with notions of fixity, authenticity and origins. The traditional academic disciplines could be viewed as trying to retain this kind of identity. That which is worth knowing does not remain static, although that which is taught often does. Postmodern thought would challenge this, citing science and technology as developing faster than they can be explained, therefore not open to labelling or categorisation. This results in an eroding of discipline boundaries. Arts subjects are more fluidly identified and more open to boundary breaching and negotiation. Studying literary texts can give an insight into the past and encourages a viewing of situations which takes into account the circumstances and feelings of others. Rarely are these skills genuinely assessed – writing essays about the texts on the reading list is more likely to test a student’s memory of the narrative; especially in an examination situation. Of course theory plays a huge part in English degrees now, but it is theory focusing on critical analysis, not, for example, creating machinery. The other skills and knowledge being developed, to sophisticated levels in some cases, are left as ‘add-ons’. There are suggestions (Yorke & Knight 2004 b) that these skills need to be fore-grounded by being included in assessments. One possible way to do this is with the inclusion of learning journals in module assessment. Humanities students tend to be open to this as they actively embrace opportunities to read, write and discuss. Learning journals enable the incremental building of skills of analysis and reflection. Sharing of journals amongst peers fosters self-confidence and empathy and peer and self assessment can be included in this alongside tutor assessment. Reflection is ‘normal’ in humanities subjects where students are encouraged to write reflectively. It is not commonplace in all disciplines but should be encouraged, with students being actively taught how to reflect if necessary. Martin and Gawthorpe (2004) offer some useful case studies from English graduates which exemplify the kind of skills they gained from their degrees and how their careers developed because of this.

The skills typically offered by humanities degree level study are often valued by other disciplines and included in their curricula to create a more hybrid and appropriate learning experience. See <http://www.health.heacademy.ac.uk/news-events/eventsbox/aandh41> for an example of a health related programme which uses an interactive approach to learning by including literature, poetry, film, drama and other arts media in the learning materials. The team explain that the point of doing this is to gain the following benefits:

- Knowledge of how the arts can be used within teaching and how they can offer another dimension to learning alongside more traditional methods.
- Understand the established theory which supports this dimension of learning
- Appreciate how the arts and humanities can assist in exploring the depth and complexity of human experience (accessed 04/05/07).

It is also worth noting that the skills most valued by many professions are often those most difficult to 'teach', and that humanities based subjects are viewed as being amongst the most proficient at encouraging these skills:

It has long been acknowledged that health practitioners rely to a large extent on the authority of their own senses and their intuitive knowledge to make professional evaluations. However the capacity for empathy, intuition, awareness, observation, and reflection cannot be taught and nurtured through traditional pedagogic methods, whereas the Arts can provide an effective vehicle for exploring and emotionally engaging with the human world. The process may not necessarily enable the student health professional to be a more humane empathic practitioner, but it does provide the potential for nurturing the skills required for dealing with human pain and distress.

<http://www.health.heacademy.ac.uk/news-events/eventsbox/aandh41>

accessed 04/05/07

The list of those to benefit from this hybrid approach to learning is a broad one including: teachers; trainers; student health professionals; qualified practitioners; unqualified practitioners and more. The inference is obvious, there are wide ranging benefits to a wide ranging audience when learning is more fluid and boundaries less adhered to. Biggs (2003) calls this kind of learner-focused approach 'constructive alignment', in that the learner builds a programme around their understanding of their own experience within the world; this acknowledges the shifting and multiple nature of our world. Biggs argues that this kind of learning encourages a deep rather than surface-focussed approach to learning and that learners should be able to undertake learning activities which progress the module's outcomes. This process is used by the Work-based Studies degree programme at the University of Teesside where the students write their own learning agreements, in negotiation with their tutor and employer (if appropriate) and can also negotiate the precise content of each module and work-based project. A high proportion of the students undertaking their degrees this way are teaching professionals who need a degree for qualified teacher status and often want predominantly humanities content.

Further methods in which to address the need to combine, embrace and foreground all appropriate skills could perhaps be borrowed from the growing field of Work-based Studies, a subject area in which students are encouraged to evidence their skills through reflection and portfolio building, typically in the format of personal development files or even tied into the required Progress File. Gray (2001) describes the aim of work-based learning as, 'to develop a dynamic synergy and dialectic between academic learning and work-based practice'. The students reflect on both personal and professional progress and development. This is linked to the curriculum by its inclusion in every core module of the scheme. Multiple short essays (750-1000 words) form a portfolio of reflection as the programme progresses. The reflection includes the student's experience of the module, current and past activities and future plans. The value of reflecting and learning from experience is posited by Schon (1983 and 1987) who describes ways to aspire to being a 'reflective practitioner'. Postmodern theorists also cite reflection as a crucial tool in developing increased levels of self-awareness, essential in a culture where identities are frequently contested by unavoidable change.

The centrality of reflection to this programme creates a culture in which it is the norm to continuously reflect, plan and develop. This facilitates progress file type activities at university and encourages CPD activities in the workplace. Students should also be encouraged to make claims for HE level credit, and hopefully advanced standing, for learning already undertaken, if in keeping with the new award. The Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) makes this possible as students can claim for experiential learning (APEL) or certificated learning (APCL) in a guided process. This means that learning is viewed both retrospectively and on an ongoing basis, which seems realistic in an ever-evolving world. Skills change, develop and become enhanced as they are used in practice. Work-based students obviously have their employment to draw upon but increasingly it is the case that the fulltime students also have some kind of job. It seems unlikely that any student will embark upon a programme of study with no existing experience or skills from life and/or work and/or previous education, HEIs need to become more attuned to acknowledging and developing existing skills. Again, postmodern thought would suggest that a forward focused trajectory is an inadequate way in which to represent being human and subsequently that what is happening in the present, and will happen in the future, has already been in some way experienced in the past:

What, then, is the postmodern? What place does it or does it not occupy in the vertiginous work of the questions hurled at the rules of image and narration? It is undoubtedly a part of the modern. All that has been received, if only yesterday... must be suspected... In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end, but in the nascent state, and this state is constant (Lyotard, 1984 p.79).

So a strict linearity is not productive, methods are not old or new but rather constantly being re-born. Therefore the retrospective way in which learning, study and experience is valued in this programme is extremely useful and appropriate; in order to adequately encompass the learner's fragmentary experience of life academia has to be prepared to operate in a more fragmentary, incremental way.

In the Work-based Studies degree programme this acknowledging of what has been, is being and will be learned is at the core of the tutor-student interaction. When students join the programme the first thing they undertake is a personal and professional audit. This involves looking back, which for (predominantly) mature students who already perceive that they are somehow 'behind' is not what they want to do. Being reflective takes time, is often painful and invariably more difficult than students anticipate. However, module evaluations almost always provide evidence that the students found the process extremely valuable. The initial module requires that they put together a portfolio of evidence which substantiates what they are claiming HE level credit for. Some of these will be generic areas of learning, such as: 'communication skills'; 'organising an event'; 'managing budgets'; whilst others are quite specialised and relate in particular to one student's own employment; such as writing lesson plans or monitoring a new engineering process. The skills and knowledge associated with the claims have to be presented within the framework of the University's existing level descriptors and to specify recognisable aims and outcomes. Suitable evidence has to be provided in order to validate the claim. As already stated these students perceive themselves to be in a hurry, others in their

workplace or profession are graduates. They cannot afford or do not want to give up their employment – this means attending the sessions on an evening after work, hence placing more pressure on themselves. The APL process facilitates advanced standing in effect as it provides the means for students to claim for past learning and transport it into their current ongoing programme of study. It is extremely empowering for students to have acknowledged that what they are doing in the workplace, or have already undertaken elsewhere, is at a comparable level to HE level study.

The module which facilitates the portfolio building process carries 20 credits at HE level 4 or level 5 and as well as offering the skills of portfolio building and credit claiming students also learn about learning styles, academic skills, how to produce a useful curriculum vitae, personal statement, job description and so on. The main point of the module is that the university examines and ratifies the learning they bring with them, but the module offers more than this in that it prepares them for further work-based studies within an academic context and further credit claims (subsequent APL claims can be made throughout the programme). This reciprocal relationship is interesting and raises the question, briefly touched on above, ‘do all students, whatever their level and background, have the potential to bring something valuable to the university?’ In the rapidly changing culture of Higher Education this reciprocity and acknowledgment of other ways of learning, and the value of a wide variety of skills may well be the key to the survival of HEIs. It seems reasonable to assume that students will learn from their course, but HEIs have been much slower to acknowledge that students also always bring to the classroom what they have already learned elsewhere – from work, life or other classroom experience.

As already stated large numbers of fulltime students now also hold down considerable amounts of employment to fund their studies. So the idea of learning and acknowledging employability skills is a sound one, made easier where students can practise and hone them as they progress. If no employment (current or previous) exists this could be overcome by arranging suitable in-company placements. A high incidence of student occupation is in sectors where the student does not plan to spend their fulltime working life, often in low-pay service sectors merely to make ends meet and because the hours can be fitted around study – E.G. evening shifts in restaurants and bars. Generic skills are still obtained from these experiences as learning manifests itself in a very wide and holistic manner. Students should always gain more from their course than the basic syllabus; learning how to learn is one of the most useful skills for life. It is this wider use of ‘learning’ per se which backs up arguments for it as a necessity for social cohesion and social justice. Subject based degrees could gain much from the work-based studies approach as it formalises what the students know already.

Accepting that much can be gained by reflecting upon and acknowledging learning already undertaken (especially by building on and enhancing this learning), also that there is much to be gained by learning for its own sake, I.E. that the process of learning is not always about new knowledge, draws further parallels with postmodern theory. It could be argued that in this technological world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is increasingly little incentive to learn anything using old-fashioned study, especially in scenarios where the knowledge being offered is accepted as finite and unquestionable, as there are escalating numbers of websites always already guaranteed to know better. Indeed last century Lyotard had already stated this and suggested that in the near

future all knowledge would be imparted by implanting a microchip in the brain and therefore dismissing the time and effort formerly required.. We have seen this come to fruition in films like *The Matrix* (Joel Silver, Warner Bros. 1999) but also in day to day life where satellite navigation and mobile technology which encompasses phone calls, videos and the world-wide web has become commonplace. Almost any fact we need to know and cannot (or do not want to) remember is still available to us.

At the time of publication Lyotard's ideas seemed extremely far-fetched but computer technology has progressed rapidly, including the enormous resources of the Internet, which in some ways has had similar effects to a micro-chip in the brain. The Internet, it could be claimed, creates an environment where nobody needs actually to learn, or know, anything anymore; that someone, or rather something, will do our knowing on our behalf. The position knowledge holds in society evolves. Lyotard suggests that perhaps postmodern theory could be used as an analytical device with which human assumptions about knowledge could be questioned. As suggested above rapidly developing technology encourages us to increasingly view knowledge as an entity very separate from the human brain; instead of something to be learned it is a useful and valuable commodity to be exchanged in a system where learning circulates as currency. John Frow comments on the centrality of this increasing commodification, 'at the heart of most theories of postmodernism is an account ...of the extension of commodification to many areas of life' (Frow 1997 p.3).

The Leitch Review echoes this sentiment; firmly connecting learning with profitability, commodity production and the generation of profit. Using knowledge as an article of commerce attaches it to technology, whose aims are all bound up in best performance, and ultimately profits. Such commodification leaves no room for individual thought or feeling, instead responses are automated and performative; repeated parody or imitation of some previously learned script. If hard facts come to be gained by the insertion of a microchip into the brain, or less radically, the click of a mouse (there are countless sites which reproduce entire texts, others which offer criticism on literature and theory ranging from the opinions of acknowledged experts to distinctly average essays and exam papers from other students) then it becomes more important to foster different skills which facilitate the ready use of this burgeoning knowledge. Strategies need to be developed which facilitate evolving with such a fast moving society; such skills as managing change and applying specific learning to varied and random situations. What is learned from experience is critical and relationships should be nurtured with those who can pass on such experiential knowledge; more HEIs need to collaborate with companies to share training and best practice. This has worked successfully in many instances for students, in mentoring and volunteering schemes and there is no reason why a similar mentoring scheme could not work between companies. Indeed some innovative firms are already working this way. Students historically benefit from company placements for work-experience and this could be further extended into exchange schemes between companies and more companies coming onto university campuses to share knowledge and even teach (E.G an international engineering firm with a base in the Tees Valley allows expert staff members to act as visiting lecturers at the University of Teesside).

These activities again require fluid boundaries to encompass the potential of the many facets of work-based and work-place learning. Work-based learning can be about the activities undertaken in the work-place (past, present or future); it can be about the

theory of learning at and through work (with the studying undertaken in a classroom); it can be about work-placements; it can be about practising hard skills in a created environment – E.G. a crime scene house laboratory created to examine simulated crime scenes for policing and forensics students (University of Teesside, <http://www.tees.ac.uk/schools/SST/crime-scene.cfm>) ; it can be about employability skills offered as a ‘bolt-on’ to an existing programme of learning - and there are many other examples. This multiplicity offers choices, but the multiple facets of this mosaic of roles, facts, experiences, events and encounters can also be conflicting and confusing. Work-based learning is viewed by some as a subject, by others as a method; it can be studied alone or combined with many other fields, an example of it which seems unambiguous to an observer may be articulated in two completely different ways by two different students. This fragmentary, often quite random, profile is reminiscent of a postmodern bricolage; a narrative which relays several strands of past, future and present, simultaneously, rather than a single recommended version. Lyotard aptly describes such a bricolage as, a ‘multiple quotation of elements taken from earlier styles or periods, classical and modern’ (Lyotard 1992). – a collection of diverse ingredients, which may not initially seem to fit together and indeed may ultimately be used for something quite other than that which was originally intended (a good example of this seems to be the persuasive skills gleaned in arguing in literary essays across texts, critics and decades, which can be put to a myriad of uses in a business setting). The creation of a bricolage by necessity is both creative and resourceful as it utilises what is available – in the same way that the Work-based Studies programme acknowledges previous learning, skills that are already there. Students do have employability skills, no matter how fledgling, HEIs need to facilitate the student’s realisation of this, via progress files; reflective writing; the APL process and so on, rather than trying to ‘teach’ employability skills, separate to other lessons, more acknowledgement, development and integration should be attempted.

One of the most persuasive connections between work-based learning and postmodern theory is that both can be viewed as simultaneously exciting and frightening; exciting because they offer huge capacity to innovate and explore new areas without the restrictions of boundaries and grand narratives; yet frightening because they are different and have the potential to question and challenge old practices. However, they do use and re-use sound experience and knowledge – the innovation comes in the method rather than the content. Despite the anxiety caused by challenging mainstream behaviour with different ways of operating there is a tangible excitement about trying something innovative; and whilst a lack of boundaries does have an impact on feelings of security the benefits it brings in terms of developing worthwhile practices mostly outweighs this. The result of the cross-divisions of postmodernism is that meanings can potentially be changed; a weakness can become a strength. A good example of this is the lack of academic experience the students bring to the Work-based Studies degree mentioned above; they usually have no academic experience, but also no bad study habits or pre-conceptions and they already know they cannot be traditional undergraduates as they cannot attend the campus through the day – so they start as clean slates, willing to work hard at being ‘not the usual’ and the results are outstanding with the graduates of the programme regularly achieving well above the University’s other programmes’ percentages of Firsts and Upper Seconds, alongside achieving success in their chosen careers.



The fragmentation associated with postmodernism also manifests itself in Work-based Studies and similarly can be viewed as either a positive or negative – negative in that it does not seem to offer safety or coherence – but positive in that it facilitates a very diverse and potentially more realistic student profile. Valuing work-based skills enables, indeed encourages, the many sides of a student to be developed. It acknowledges that alongside the subject-core of a degree a student equally needs generic, personal and work-place specific skills. In a society where employees are often required to change their jobs several times it is crucial that they are equipped with as diverse a portfolio of skills as possible and it is the personal and generic ‘employability’ skills which will equip them to survive this environment. As previously mentioned the ability to learn could be as useful as what is actually learned. Understanding how to learn (learning styles, metacognition, reflection, self-regulation, etc) and understanding how to manipulate and apply this ability will create a responsive and productive workforce. Part of learning to learn is taking responsibility for self learning and not viewing a tutor as an imparter of knowledge. Tutors instead become facilitators of a learning process in which the learner becomes increasingly aware and empowered and therefore more likely to undertake learning activities independently of both tutor and group. Work-based learners can help to activate their student peers who are studying employability skills because they tend to be equipped with skills to make them, what Gray (2001) terms, ‘self-directed problem solvers who bring their personal skills, knowledge and attitudes to the learning situation’. It seems obvious that learners with such a profile will energise a group situation but regardless of whether some such students are present in mixed groups tutors still need staff development if they are to act as multifaceted catalysts. Knight and Yorke (2004 p.193) comment on the lack of professional education in pedagogy and curriculum matters and this lack needs addressing.

The Leitch Review (Dec 2006) suggests a target of 40% of adults in the UK should be qualified to HE level 4 by 2020. This is a massive (perhaps physically impossible) aim and to come anywhere close to it HEIs will have to be prepared to change their culture. For example:

- Delivery needs to be more fluid; frameworks are necessary but they need to be used flexibly. This includes the times and places at which learning is offered, for example more weekend and off-campus provision should be facilitated.
- Past learning from experience and study needs to be acknowledged wherever and whenever it occurs – wide use should be made of the APL process. Postmodernism offers an example by consuming and absorbing the past by re-visiting and re-casting it, rather than memorialising a single version via grand narratives. As Frow suggests, ‘continuous shifts...partial continuities running through multiple strands of time’ (Frow 1997 p.3).
- Most importantly HEIs need to open up meaningful dialogues with employers by asking them what they want, but also what they can offer. In order to fulfil the Government vision of learning opportunities inspired by employer demand this last point is probably the most crucial as it has the potential to greatly assist the issue of employability skills, whatever the discipline.



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