

CHAPTER 13

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CONSTRUCTING PROFESSIONALS' EMPLOYABILITIES: CONDITIONS FOR ACCOMPLISHMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

Doubts have been cast on the current trend to develop definitive lists of graduate attributes of employability. At least two problems present in this development work. Firstly, knowledge and skills reside in *shared practices* as much as in individuals. In recent years, the focus has shifted from treating knowledge and skills as something that people possess to something that they do as part of practice (Cook & Brown 1999; Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). It is commonly understood that knowledge and skills are inevitably embedded in a wide set of considerations, such as work organisation, organisational routines, employment relations, industrial relations and community relations.

Secondly, generic skills profiles do not explain why (and more importantly perhaps how) a particular graduate emerged and whether this graduate can perform the required skills in a specific work situation. Graduates get better (at some particular course of action) as they gain confidence and competence in some socially important categories of practice. Recent research on generic skills suggests that the primary context for the development of generic skills is work, and that the main mode of development is experiential learning (Virgona et al. 2003: 6).

It can be argued that currently established discourses of employability – most particularly the competence movement's appropriation of employability in which employability skills are narrowly defined as functional skills – are better at describing the *outcomes* of change(s) in graduate attributes than at analysing the

processes behind them. Experiential learning is one such process. The deliberate design of learning and teaching strategies is another.

Employability is a complex concept that has both formal and non-formal dimensions. Employability skills are commonly put together as skills frameworks or skills schemes for national industry or professional bodies and, as such, they are formal descriptions of skill.

Consider this example from an Australian federal government-sponsored Report:

Enterprises participating in the research placed a strong emphasis on the need for both entry level and ongoing employees to exhibit a broad range of personal attributes. Employers suggested that entry level and ongoing employees needed to reflect attributes that were acceptable to the rest of their peer working group and the customer and in line with the company's approach ... [They] stressed the need to ensure future employees developed these personal attributes, as they are an integral feature of an employable person, and a key component of the Employability Skills Framework (*DEST 2002: 6*).

What are these personal attributes?

... loyalty, commitment, honesty and integrity, enthusiasm, reliability, personal presentation, commonsense, positive self-esteem, sense of humour, balanced attitude to work and home life, ability to deal with pressure, motivation, adaptability (*DEST 2002: 7*).

The Report notes that '[t]here is no doubt that enterprises saw the inclusion of these attributes as a new and essential component of employability skills', which are as follows: communication, team-work, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning, technology (*2002: 7*).

Because such lists of desired attributes omit the details of actual practice, they may be less important to an industry or profession's capacity to prosper than descriptions that do include these details. Formal representations of skill, such as these lists, cannot easily capture elements of knowledge which remain specific and tacit. In developing profiles of skill, one can easily fall into the trap of 'believing that all knowledge is verbalisable, so that important knowledge is left out' (Stevenson 2001: 658). Typically, this important knowledge is embodied and embedded. As Eraut (2000) has it, 'the limitations to making tacit knowledge explicit are formidable...'. The probability is that "thick" tacit versions will coexist alongside "thin" explicit versions: the thick version will be used in professional practice, the thin version for justification' (2000: 134–5).

This chapter focuses on 'thick' descriptions and ascriptions of abilities to professionals, that is to say, in their work practices – in the very doing of their work. The particularities of the immediate workplace context are, we argue, the signifiers of identities, which are at once both social and embodied. Our argument proceeds in two ways.

Firstly, in the next section, a new conceptual account of how somebody comes to 'understand' something is given. This locates a worker's agency in making judgements about how to proceed, in the conduct of the work, in the sociality of particular workplaces. These judgements are articulated in peer contexts which partially construct not only what counts as workplace practice, but also the identities of the practitioners.

Secondly, in the following section, two case studies of identity formation, through practice, are presented.

The intention throughout is to show that close attention to the particularities of work practices generates the attributes or capacities required for employment – that one learns *for* work by *doing* work – and that, by extrapolation, lifelong learning occurs across the lifespan in diverse settings, with particularistic 'accomplishments', beyond which what could be claimed as 'generic' is vaporous.

2. ACCOMPLISHING 'UNDERSTANDING' THROUGH PRACTICAL INFERENCES

Some of our current work shows how embodied actions at work re-present not just the work practices, but also the identities of the workers (Mulcahy 2000; Beckett & Morris 2001; Morris & Beckett 2004). The *doing* drives the emergence of practices, and of the workers, whose identities are co-constructed through those practices. These ontological considerations are raised afresh in the next section, but this section (drawing substantially upon Beckett 2001, 2004) deals with a fundamental epistemological aspect: how can 'understanding' be accomplished through practice? The short answer is: through the social articulation of inferences. But what is an inferentialist approach?

Almost fifty years ago, the American philosopher Wilfred Sellars (1912–1989), in his most influential work, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind (EPM)*, consistently attacked what is known as foundationalism, or the 'Myth of the Given'. DeVries & Triplett (2000) characterise it in this way:

... very roughly, the idea is that direct knowledge does not have to be achieved or arrived at by inferring, pondering, sorting of evidence, calling forth memories, comparing data, or using other constructive cognitive processes. All it has to do is simply be there. It requires only the person's attention, if even that, in order to be knowledge for that person. As such, it is given. And the rest of one's knowledge, the indirectly known, has to be built up from what is given by the sorts of cognitive processes just noted. It follows that direct knowledge must be noninferential (2000: *xix*).

The Given is presumably an endangered species, if not already extinct. Blackburn's *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (1994) describes it as a 'name adopted by Sellars for the now widely-rejected view that sense experience gives us particular points of certainty, suitable to serve as foundations for the whole of empirical knowledge and science'. We are not about to resurrect the Given, which is the non-inferential, directly available basis of knowledge. Instead we take seriously a broadly Sellarsian resurrection of the *contrasting* view: inferentialism. Inferentialism is a conceptualisation of claims which:

- account for what is 'epistemically efficacious' about experience, (that is, how we come to know what to do next) and
- are at several points 'ostensively tied' to reality (that is, are about this world now), and
- *emerge with new properties, amidst public justifications (articulated inferences).*

'Inferential understanding', as advanced herein, requires all three of these criteria, since all are required for the achievement of understanding, but our interest is only in the third criterion: the emergent articulation, as 'understandings', of particular practices, in one's public context, that is, amongst one's professional peers.

Instead of grounding knowledge in the refinement of a state of the mind (which fits with the Cartesian origins of the Given), inferentialists like Brandom (2000) argue for 'a form of linguistic pragmatism that might take as its slogan Sellars's principle that grasping a concept is mastering the use of a word' (Brandom 2000: 6; he acknowledges a Deweyian, Jamesian and Wittgensteinian heritage). Brandom's expressivism – this 'usage' – sees the mind not as a mirror (representing what is inner and is outer), but, similar to a lamp,

... making explicit what is implicit. This can be understood in a pragmatist sense of turning something we can initially only do into something we can say: codifying some sort of knowing how in the form of a knowing that. (2000: 8)

Educators have gone some way further with this already: workplace learning and especially the Schonian 'reflective practitioner' at work are redolent of this conversion of what is done (acted) into what is said (articulated). This directs attention to the emergence of understanding, with its propositional form (knowing *that*) regarded as an accomplishment – the outcome of a *process* – rather than (as traditionally) a product. The contrast with Cartesian epistemology could hardly be more dramatic.

The Givenist claim on 'experience', as such, matches, and perhaps grew out of, the broader Cartesian epistemology that first-person reports of how one thinks or feels (avowals) provided ineffable knowledge of the world and one's place in it ('what I know best is what I know first'). We now acknowledge that this Enlightenment epistemology was underpinned by, and in turn supported, an ontology: that there were two kinds of stuff in the world (mental and material), with all the implications this has had for educational provision, for pedagogy and for labour markets. Cartesian dualism required that the material world make a mentalistic 'impression' or footprint, which became a representation or image of experience, to be corrected and refined by formal education, which had as its first priority the inculcation of an 'idea'. The mind as a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) on which education was inscribed was popular.

In contrast to this Cartesian epistemology, Brandom's expressive 'linguistic pragmatism' sits well with certain educational and pedagogical innovation, in adults' workplaces, as we shall see shortly. And the Sellarsian backdrop is congenial. Instead of a Givenist foundationalism, Sellars provides the resources for a countertradition in both epistemology and in ontology, one that does not require Cartesianism. As DeVries & Triplett (2000) summarise:

According to Sellars, we know first the public world of physical objects. We can extend that framework to include persons and their language. What we know best, however, are those beliefs that are the most well-supported pieces of the most coherent, well-substantiated explanatory framework available to us ... our best knowledge will be provided to us by the efforts of science. *The picture of knowledge created is that of a communal, self-correcting enterprise that grows from unsophisticated beginnings toward an increasingly detailed and adequate understanding of ourselves and the world* (2000: xlvi) [emphasis added].

We believe the way forward is to unpack that notion of the articulation of inferences as a 'communal, self-correcting enterprise'. Expressive, pragmatic understandings of experience are really *how adults' workplaces are shaped*. Beckett & Hager (2002) show what this centring of 'knowing *how*' does to and for traditional education. In a nutshell, 'knowing how' to proceed at work, for most adults, requires a series of decisional actions, some of them articulated, which issue in change. To give these experiences the epistemological significance they deserve, we need to add the 'knowing why'. The argument here, and in our other current work, is that inferentialism – the 'communal, self-correcting' justifications given by an individual at work of why she or he acted thus-and-so – looks promising.

It follows that if we are serious about how understanding at and through work is accomplished, then the reflective action of making a 'judgement' is central. Workers do this all day, every day, and we claim these adult learning experiences are central to a new epistemology of practice, and therefore to exploring generic skill formation.

Briefly, our claim is that how a person goes on to do something (what 'know how' consists in) is not about something other than itself (like a propositional state, or a product, such as is Given), but rather about what that person finds herself or himself undergoing, in what it is to be human. Frequently, what humans find themselves doing is making decisions (judgements) about what to do next. Workplace learning is increasingly shaped by this sort of fluid experience ('knowing how' to go on), but it needs to be *made explicit* (as in Brandom's 'expressive approach', above). The 'making explicit' is what the best adult teachers and trainers can do, in facilitating, even revealing, adults' experiences for educational purposes. Mentoring schemes are an example.

Judgements under this latter, inferentialist, model of agency are *practical* in that they are expected to be efficacious: they deal in what is thought to be good (that is to say, appropriate) *in specific contexts in which they are embedded*. This contextuality is crucial and is further developed in the two case studies in the next section.

There has to be this pragmatic point to it all, especially for coming to understand practice through generic skill formation. 'Problem-solving' for lawyers will carry inferences for and from practice differently than for masons. Earlier, we noted that Brandom (2000) locates inferentialism in the *pragmatic expression* of knowledge claims. He means, as a Sellarsian, to move the achievement of understanding beyond static representationalism into a more dynamic, process-

focussed mode (what may be called the 'counter-tradition' in epistemology). He unpacks this when he states:

According to the inferentialist account of concept use, in making [an explicit truth] claim one is implicitly endorsing a set of inferences, which articulate its conceptual content. Implicitly endorsing those inferences is a sort of doing. Understanding [sic] the conceptual content to which one has committed oneself is a kind of practical mastery: a bit of know-how that consists in being able to discriminate what does and does not follow from the claim, what would be evidence for or against it and so on. (2000: 19)

In expressing this personal mastery at and through work, adults find themselves committed to and bound up in socio-cultural expectations, specific to their practices, that thus-and-so (whatever the course of action is) will be justifiable – and can be justified.

These practical understandings *emerge*. What can this mean? Acts of judgments are 'doings', and they possess new properties, not reducible to their origins in workplace experiences. DeVries and Triplett (2000), in their useful Glossary, define 'emergent properties' as:

The often murky but persistent idea that, in at least some complexes (such as organisms) some of the properties of the complex as a whole are (1) genuinely novel; or (2a) unpredictable ... or (2b) not reducible to ... the properties of the parts; or (2c) not explainable by the occurrence of the properties of the parts. The notion of an emergent property is not that of a property, the initial temporal instantiation of which succeeds the temporal instantiation of other properties, but of a *property that is in some way ontologically distinctive from the kinds of properties true of the parts of the whole* (2000: 183) [*emphasis added*].

Now workplaces that are serious about the productive exercise of generic skills are keen to support them in favour of novel, unexpected outcomes, albeit those that contribute to strategic as well as individual purposes. Inferential understanding thus provides a theoretical underpinning for this support for 'ontologically distinctive' properties that are not merely more general properties with antecedent components: they are a new entity, or phenomenon, or process. In brief: the making of a judgment ('knowing how' to go on) is the exercise within adults' workplace experiences of an 'emergent property'. Such an exercise is a form of doing, where there are distinctive reasons articulable in that process of doing (the 'knowing why'). Thus the inference of understanding is available to others, as well as to the individual: "I/She did x, because I/we/they can justify it like this ...".

An example of this is the model of holistic, or integrated competence, which has been developed in Australia, in the 1990s (Gonczi, Hager & Oliver 1990; Hager & Beckett 1995). This is explicitly based on the *inference* of competence from an array of performative evidence, and is sensitive to the ‘contextual’ nature of generic skill formation and development. It fits with the judgement-driven nature of workplace learning, and it invites a diversity of assessment evidence in support of judgements – inferences – of competence. Furthermore, this ‘Australian model’ (labelled by Hyland 1997) generates an ontologically distinctive outcome: the competent practitioner, whose practice is defensibly competent, by reference to the public standards of a work-based peer group (such as profession, or occupational association or industry). It is an example of what Brandom (2000) called the ‘communal self-correction’ of individuals’ actions – and even of identities. It also appears that generic skill formation, if it were to have any purchase on particular workplace experiences (that is, in the case of graduates, enhancing their ‘employability’) would need to make available opportunities for this ‘communal self-correction’. Group-based project work would be a workplace-specific example of this communal self-correction, where a new graduate (or someone on field placement whilst still in tertiary studies) could endeavour to display her or his generic skills in real life with real peers. Without such a context for the claim to possess or to have acquired generic skills, they float off the planet.

We have in this section shown how a Sellarsian approach to ‘understanding’ gives due significance to the dynamics and realities of adults’ workplaces, and to the processes now acknowledged in many workplaces which advance this ‘communal self-correcting’. This self-correction is the public articulation of reasons for acting, and in this way, professionals’ practices shape the accomplishment of ‘understanding’.

But there is an ontological dimension to this accomplishment, as we stated earlier. The co-construction of the Self through workplace practices establishes identities as ‘competent’ or ‘skilled’ workers. Central to these constructions and reconstructions are communal self-corrections: we are both subject to and objects of our Selfhood. Understanding, and identities, emerge in these agential processes. We turn now to identities.

3. PROFESSIONALS’ FORMATION: IDENTITY, HETEROGENEITY AND EMPLOY-ABILITY

In this section, we draw on the understanding of the learning experiences of a student teacher and practising teachers, as case studies, to examine further the

relationship between professional identity formation and employability, showing in particular how employability is primarily to be seen not in terms of personal attributes or sets of skills (so called employability skills) but rather performances of practice in 'ecologies of practice' (Stronach et al. 2002). The term 'ecology of practice' refers to "the sorts of individual and collective experiences, beliefs and practices that professionals accumulate in learning and performing their roles. They relate mainly to 'craft knowledge', and may be intuitive, tacit or explicit" (2002: 132). The notion of 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) does much the same work.

The primary performance concerns identity formation and change – 'the hidden dimensions that make "generic skills" appear as they are' (Falk 2002: 8). Formal representations such as the knowledge representations encoded in generic skills profiles hide all manner of heterogeneity within (Mulcahy 1999). In what follows, we attempt to render these hidden heterogeneities (Law 2002) more visible. In so doing, we shift the grounds on which questions pertaining to the reality of employability may be addressed. We shift the question from what it is to *have* employability skills, or *be* employable, to what it is to *do* employability: employability is constructed as a component of a practice, or rather of a variety of different practices, hence employabilities.

3.1 Asha's Story: Student Teacher Formation Through Problem-Based Learning

Teacher education has come under increasing scrutiny by governments in Australia over the last decade. Faculties of Education are under pressure to improve the quality of teacher graduates and to align the underpinning knowledge and skills produced through teacher education programs to the needs of schools, the profession and the community. Accordingly, a group of teacher educators began, in 2001, to talk and think about a new design for a program in initial teacher education:

Beginning teachers face a future that will be very different, in unimagined ways, from the present. They will need to be flexible and cope easily with diversity and ambiguity. They may be asked to function in both local and global communities, arriving at curricular, pedagogical and policy decisions after due consideration of evidence and possibilities. They will be expected to work in innovative ways as members of professional learning teams, actively researching their practice and contributing to the growth of these teams. They will engage in the development of the curriculum, the formation of policy, the improvement of the schools within which they are located, and the enhancement of the teaching profession. ... The problems

that they will encounter in schools, and in other learning contexts, will require cross-disciplinary thinking and complex problem-defining and resolving skills. These skills are at the heart of teachers' work (*Hildebrand, Mulcahy & Wilks 2001: 1*).

Student teachers elect to join the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) program which attempts to ensure that graduates develop broad-based generic skills such as critical thinking, problem-defining and problem-resolving. The three domains of professional knowledge, professional practice and school concerns provide a platform for this development.

Asha, one of these student teachers, tells of tensions between these domains, in this instance, between 'trying to get the best possible marks' and maintaining a reasonable relationship with the school supervisor:

If ... you're in a situation where you're not always comfortable with the supervisor that you've got ... that's a big issue. And a lot of people that I spoke to (who) weren't contemplating doing PBL said to me 'Why would you do it? You're going to be in the same school twice. What happens if you don't like your supervisor?' I mean it's not a question of liking or disliking the supervisor. At the end of the day you are trying to get the best possible marks. You're trying to make the most out of your situation. And so if there are any uneasy kind of feelings you're going to be at that school for quite a long time. I suppose that teaches you how to deal with different types of situations but I can see how that might really affect someone who isn't quite ready for it (*Interview: 20/10/2001*).

As it happened, Asha managed this (and other) tensions particularly successfully. She did indeed make the most out of her situation, moving on, after her studies, to a full-time teaching position in a prestigious private school. How was this movement accomplished? For Asha, as for various other students, the formal well-bounded requirements of her course – for example, the espoused attributes of flexibility and coping with ambiguity – are met in and through nests of practices within the networks of practice that grow up both on campus and at school:

I think working with (other) PBL students is great. They challenge you. They make you rethink your opinions. You can challenge them. Everyone is quite free and, you know, quite ready to speak up for themselves, which is great. And because it's a smaller group you get to bond together and you get to know one another in a way that you probably wouldn't ... if you were just doing the straight course.

Teachers are very busy. ... You don't really have a lot of meeting(s) with teachers just on PBL issues. But you soak it all up. You soak it up especially during your

rounds. You try and establish relationships. ... I found it was my initiative that brought out anything that happened. My school contact person was a very, very, very busy person. He does everything by schedule and he's a fantastic dynamo of a person. But, at the end of the day, again, he had a lot of commitments. He did try to share his time with me but I almost had to soak it up through just his presence.

Taking initiative, Asha establishes relationships with peers and experienced teachers. Professional identity formation involves being challenged by peers and keeping company with experienced teachers – soaking up professional knowledge through 'just their presence'. Contemporary conditions of teachers' work do not lend themselves to formal meetings with student teachers; rather, these teachers build knowledge and skill in a tacit, concrete, bodily way. In the context of PBL, Asha's identity is an enactment that comes in many forms: bonding with peers, 'shadowing' skilled practitioners, observing their practice, participating in the observed practice, reflecting on the outcomes of this participation, both individually and in a group, researching the underpinnings of the practice, and so on. It is also emergent.

In practice, if not in principle, employability skills are the outcome or product of *collective work*, some of which, at least, appears more felt than said:

(The facilitator) picked up the mood of the group quite well. And she would often get us to work with that and, finally, with those, sometimes, mood issues which you sort of don't have words for. You knew; you just felt things.

Here, generic skills take the form of learnt capacities embedded in a shifting set of considerations or conditions – staff facilitation; student personal and collective understanding.

A successful enactment of the identities of employable graduate and prospective teacher would appear to involve mobilising a complex set of identifications – with peers, school supervisors, teacher educators – in response to shifting contexts. This mobilisation or 'self work' is largely hidden from view. Among other things, it involves working the space between sites of learning: '... making a link between the learning on campus and learning in schools. I was constantly reflecting on that'.

Bhabha (2001: 136), writing in the context of debates around post-coloniality and the postmodern, draws attention to 'those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences'. The contesting claims of peers, campus and school can be negotiated in 'in-between' spaces. Bhabha describes these thus: "In-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating

strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself’ (2001: 136-137).

Asha initiates new signs of identity in a relational, cross-locational way:

Making a student feel important is very important because as a student you’re walking around and you have to ask all these tough questions to people that are so much more experienced than you. You do need a bit of resilience, you do need to feel supported. For instance at (x school) with (x supervisor), even though I didn’t always have him around, when I did, after the meeting, I always felt important. I always felt good. So that was something very useful. And that’s why I valued his contribution so much.

If you see a person from (x university) walking around with a student teacher, that immediately adds a bit more status, I guess, to that person because, ultimately, especially if that person is walking around by himself or herself, it does help to have a bit of back up.

Her resilience as a prospective teacher is a product of staff support and institutional standing. It is built out of the materials to hand and in relation to local practice and conditions: ‘even though I didn’t always have him around, when I did, after the meeting, I always felt important’.

For one of Asha’s peers, identity appears to be a matter of linking ‘knowings’ of various kinds:

... really worthwhile learning is when it almost becomes a part of you. You know, the whole experience becomes a part of you and stuff. And I think that is what the PBL is like. Because you’ve got all these ideas and you’ve linked them to memories, and things that happened to you, and things that you had to work out the hard way, and things that you saw and things that you felt. It’s real context based and multiple intelligence learning (*Interview: 25/10/2001*).

Practical understandings formed in the sociality of particular learning spaces emerge as important:

We were always talking all the time. That communication. But that’s where you do get a lot of your ideas from. And those ideas were the ones that actually helped me when I did go to lectures and listen to the more theoretical stuff and when I did look at the literature. And I often found that most of us ... we’d almost thought of all the ideas in the literature before we read them. And when we read them it was a bit more like there was a recognition ... that, yes, they’re useful ideas because we thought of

them ourselves pretty much. We've seen that they occur, rather than reading the literature and thinking: 'Oh this is something that I've got to make myself learn and understand'.

These understandings are emergent; importantly, they are achieved in conjunction with others: 'We'd almost thought of all the ideas in the literature before we read them'. This case material suggests that employability is not a private, personal substance, but socially constructed and distributed: spread out over students, staff and sites. Located in the whole array. As Asha comments:

The learning experience I had was fantastic. I learnt things which I wasn't always aware I was learning. Again I just soaked up so much from other PBL students, from staff at schools, from actually doing my assignments, from my facilitator. Drawing all the information together for tasks, for looking at problems, for coming up with solutions. So there was a lot of hands on learning. There was a lot of practical learning.

Like the picture of knowledge painted by Sellars, the picture of employability that emerges is that of a 'communal, self-correcting enterprise that grows from unsophisticated beginnings toward an increasingly detailed and adequate understanding' (DeVries & Triplett 2000: xlvi).

3.2 Stella's Story: English Language and Literacy Teachers' Formation Through Standards

The project, Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA), began in 1999 as a three-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council. The purpose of the project was to develop subject specific standards for primary and secondary teachers of English that acknowledge the complexity of teaching. With the assistance of two national subject associations (the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association) teacher panels were set up in different states to develop the STELLA standards. The standards were derived from panel discussions about criteria for good teaching and narratives about good teaching (Gill 1999: 74).

The STELLA Standards Framework (<http://www.stella.org.au/>) consists of statements of what accomplished teachers of English and Literacy believe, know and are able to do. Standards statements are grouped under three broad headings:

- Professional knowledge;
- Professional practice;
- Professional engagement.

Each statement contains a *core description* (of what accomplished teachers of English and Literacy believe, know and are able to do) and *key words* and *focus questions* for reflection and discussion. The key words identify *attributes* that can be used to describe accomplished teaching as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Extract from STELLA: Standards statement 3.2 – teachers continue to learn

3. Professional Engagement	
3.2 Teachers continue to learn	
Standards statement (core descriptions of what accomplished teachers of English and Literacy believe, know and are able to do)	Key words & Focus questions (For reflection and discussion)
<p>3.2 Teachers continue to learn</p> <p>Accomplished English / Literacy teachers recognise that the context of their teaching is continually evolving. They reflect on, analyse and are able to articulate all aspects of their professional practice, constantly reviewing and refining their teaching to improve students' learning opportunities, and searching for answers to challenging pedagogical questions. They seek opportunities to discuss the effectiveness of their teaching with colleagues, students, parents and care givers.</p> <p>With their own learning goals in mind, accomplished English / literacy teachers pursue new knowledge through professional renewal activities such as ...</p>	<p>Reflection</p> <p>How does the teacher maintain and further develop his / her personal and professional growth?</p> <p>Critique</p> <p>To what extent does the teacher contribute to and learn from current debates about teaching and learning?</p> <p>How open is the teacher in questioning and evaluating classroom, school and wider literacy practices?</p> <p>Development</p> <p>What professional learning goals does the teacher have? What opportunities are taken up to learn from courses, colleagues and the workplace?</p>

For English/Literacy teachers, continuing to learn and get better at teaching is determined by processes of 'reflection', 'critique' and 'development'. For the purposes of the present discussion, these processes are not only attributes used to describe accomplished teaching but also employability skills. As Field comments, employability skills 'should be taken as skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within a company so as (a) to achieve

one's potential and (b) contribute successfully to company strategic directions' (2001: 11).

As the STELLA Standards Framework has it, should teachers of English and Literacy want to progress in the teaching profession, they require the capacity to reflect, critique and develop professionally. *Doing* employability here is a matter of practising in particular ways (reflectively, critically ...). This practising is always condition and context dependent, partial, inconclusive and indeterminate. One of the interesting features of the STELLA Standards Framework is that conditions and contexts are kept in view. The developers of these standards have practised a style of developing in which teaching standards (and, by extension, employability standards) are not produced as entities in and of themselves but rather as indissolubly linked to teaching practice. The focus throughout is on what the professional practitioner finds herself or himself undergoing in practising well (or failing to practise well).

Each of the attributes used to describe accomplished teachers of English and Literacy is embedded in a teacher narrative in which questions pertaining to the reality of accomplishment (employability) are addressed. For example, in the narrative, 'We are teaching kids, not subjects', a teacher of a year 8 English class, tells of tensions surrounding teaching a set text. He questions an established discourse and practice of English teaching and, in so doing, enacts curriculum *critique*:

We all know good teaching is good acting, at least in part; but maybe I hammed my lines. Perhaps they picked up on my insincere enthusiasm for the book. But how could they have when my initial enthusiasm was genuine, at least in part? What a thing to get hung up on. I should have turfed the book and found something else. Yet, if I did that, it would set a precedent, and there would be ignited a raging subversive fire of refusing to read set texts: or so I was told. Where would it all end? If we weren't careful we might be in a position where we would not be able to teach *Of Mice and Men* at Year 10 (http://www.stella.org.au/narrative_content.jsp?id=41)

Forming part of the standards statement 'Teachers continue to learn', critique is not extracted from practice but rather linked to various and different practices – personal ('What a thing to get hung up on'), professional ('I should have turfed the book') and political ('Where would it all end?'). These practices in turn are nested within, or networked with, other practices. Curriculum, pedagogy, policy and teacher identity are under examination here. As are classroom, school and wider literacy practices. Teacher identities are co-constructed through these.

Thinking back to the last section, we are witness to a teacher making decisions (judgements) about what to do next. Self-correction takes a communal form. If this teacher ‘turfs the book’, ‘it would set a precedent, and there would be ignited a raging subversive fire of refusing to read set texts’, or, so he *was told*. The correction of teacher action is at the same time the correction of teacher identity. The decision not to turf the book carries along with it the decision not to initiate a different teacher identity (teacher-who-sets-a-precedent; ignites-a-raging-subversive-fire). Contextuality, or better perhaps, specificity, is also crucial: had the teacher turfed that particular book and ‘found something else’ the issue of student disengagement may not have arisen.

Enacted variously in various situations, critique comes in the plural. While in some schemas critique might be thought a single, separate skill, in the STELLA Standards Framework it takes multiple and diverse forms. There are as many critiques as there are practices in which critique is performed. In this further teacher narrative, critique carries inferences from practice somewhat differently than the narrative above:

My class programs consisted of a series of discrete units of work with the systematic coverage of a range of genres being the main organizing factor. Upon reflection, my major dissatisfaction with this practice was that it allowed little real choice for students and, as a consequence, students were frequently not really fully ‘engaged’ in the writing and speaking tasks that the class program generated. In comparison, the essence of the writing workshop approach ... is that students basically learn to write by writing and therefore need to spend a significant proportion of available class time in actual writing. In an effort to achieve the real engagement with tasks previously perceived to be missing, I now have students work on writing tasks of their own choice rather than ones set by the teacher. The principle at work here is a version of the old adage that one volunteer is worth ten pressed men (http://www.stella.org.au/narrative_content.jsp?id=9).

The object of this teacher’s critique might be called theory-in-practice: which approach to teaching writing assists writers to be ‘really fully “engaged”’? Tensions exist between two epistemologies of practice, ‘the systematic coverage of a range of genres’ and ‘the writing workshop approach’. Enacting critique, this teacher works the tension between these two: ‘My classroom practice is currently based on an endeavour to marry a form of process writing ... with a genre / functional grammar approach’.

In attempting to understand practice through generic skill formation, we are compelled to consider *practices*. Understandings shape the conduct of practice and practices shape the accomplishment of understanding. Thus, in the vignette above,

we see a teacher striving to improve existing practice through articulating understandings of alternative practices that might make this improvement. The close attention given to the particularities of work routine and practice generates a capacity for critique: 'My class programs consisted of a series of discrete units of work with the systematic coverage of a range of genres being the main organizing factor'.

Similarly, identity shapes the conduct of practice and practices shape the accomplishment of identity. This teacher grows dissatisfied with a class program where 'a range of genres' is covered; he performs a self that is less teacher-centred and creates conditions for students to learn (and form identities) as volunteers rather than as 'pressed men'. The practice of self work and teaching work go hand in hand: each is caught up in the other. Importantly, this work is of a public kind – undertaken as part of the project of developing subject specific standards for the English teaching profession. It is inherently social (communal) in character. The categories of self work, teaching work and project work tend to merge. Altogether, the STELLA project would appear to have created the right conditions for the accomplishment of teacher professional standards ('understanding') and of a particular kind of teacher practitioner, the *accomplished practitioner*, whose practice is defensibly accomplished by reference to these standards.

4. CONDITIONS FOR ACCOMPLISHMENT: THE SHARED, THE LOCAL AND THE PARTICULAR

Once one starts to ask how employability is *practised*, there are a number of different answers to the question 'what is employability' or, our preferred term employ-abilities. These 'answers' are given with respect to two *genres* of employability: (i) a 'representationalist' genre in which employability is talked about as if it were in isolation – able to be described more or less accurately by a text, such as a 'list' – and (ii) an 'enacting' genre in which it is talked about as a component of practice. Our concern in this chapter has been to make the latter genre more visible. Employability skills are statements – formalisations or abstract representations – of knowledge and skill which are put together by a particular group of people (employers, practising professionals) in a particular way (as skill sets or skill profiles). These skills only exist however, if they are practically performed. In other words, we need to acknowledge their intimate relationship with – their co-dependency on – practice. The conditions of this performance, the salient aspects of practice, are what interest us here.

In STELLA's story, teacher narratives are the bridge between *what is done* (practice) and *what is said* (understandings, standards, employability skills). Grounded in practical judgments, they draw attention to the inter-section and co-implication of these two. The STELLA standards are built around sets of case studies, in essence, 'thick' descriptions of teaching performance. The special contribution of case material is to locate generic skills in the 'recognisable and indeterminate realm of professional judgment' (Louden 1993: 18). Our attention is directed to this indeterminate realm as well as the processes by which this realm is rendered more determinate (more explicit, more immutable). In STELLA's story, this rendering work is made very visible. As noted above, the standards were derived from panel discussions about criteria for good teaching and narratives about good teaching. They are the product of *shared* work – the emergent articulation, as standards, of particular practices, by members of specific subject associations.

The making of knowledge (and representations of knowledge) is a highly *local* affair. As Smith and Comyn have it:

employability skills are context-bound, in that different industries and employers value and weight the skills and attributes quite differently. The worth of employability skills can only be fully appreciated in the workplace where the consequences of such skills can be seen(2003: 10–11).

The STELLA skills are not causes but consequences of teacher-researcher and teacher-professional work. The position that a skill may be seen as a consequence, and not as an antecedent, is axiomatic to the pragmatist approach. Unable to be developed in isolation, conditions for accomplishment apply and these conditions are quite *particular*. A skill is a property of some actions rather than others. For example, certain workplaces provide rich opportunities for participation in learning and development. The skills that Asha builds in pursuing the problems presented in Problem-Based Learning are conditional upon the opportunity afforded by her practice school to 'walk around and ... ask all these tough questions'. Certain projects, such as action learning and (some) standards development projects, provide rich opportunities for participation in communal self-correction: 'Upon reflection, my major dissatisfaction with this practice was that it allowed little real choice for students and, as a consequence, students were frequently not really fully "engaged"'.

In respect of workplace learning, Evans & Kersh (2003) identify two types of workplace environment: *restrictive* (or non-stimulating) and *expansive* (or

stimulating). 'The expansive or stimulating workplace environment is closely related to recognition and development of *tacit skills* and opportunities to engage in non-formal learning' (2003: 68, emphasis in original). Given the argument made throughout this chapter, inferentialism – the 'communal self-correcting' justifications given by an individual at work of why she or he acted thus-and-so – also needs to be taken into account. A workplace that creates a range of opportunities, both formal and informal, for (re)constructing workers' employabilities might be considered an expansive workplace.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

In the Australian context, discussions around lifelong learning have tended to emphasise skill training and employability issues (Robinson 2000; Stanwick 2003). The technical-rational basis of much of this discussion has meant that attention has been directed to the outcomes of lifelong learning and away from the processes that secure these outcomes. Accordingly, we have sought in this chapter to redirect attention to questions of process and practice. Like employability, lifelong learning is primarily to be seen not in terms of intrinsic capabilities or potentialities but rather performances of practice in ecologies of practice. It is inevitably implicated in the *everyday of concrete practices* which promote the formation and reformation of skills and identities.

Identifying the conditions for the accomplishment of employabilities is an important issue in the facilitation of lifelong learning. The picture of learning created is that of a shared, self-correcting enterprise (such as the Problem-Based Learning program, the STELLA project) in which understanding is accomplished collectively. We have set out a new understanding of 'understanding' itself. If intelligent action contributes to this new approach, it is because it starts with a serious focus on agency and then approaches it in a new way. Rather than asking how learning, through acquisition of generic skills from some national list, for example, is *represented* to the learner ('Has there been a change in the state of the learner?'), a more profound question is 'What *inferences* can now be articulated by the learner?' (Lifelong) learning takes on a more agentic look and feel.

Emergent properties of inferential understanding at work will take any number of forms depending on the variables in particular workplaces. And it is this that should guide the way generic skills are theorised: are there public ways workers (or learners, still in formal studies) can articulate their judgments which are, by definition, located in local and particular workplace experiences? This supplies the

'knowing why'. Teamwork, and other forms of socially-reflective practice (for example, 360 degree appraisals, 'retreats', role plays, simulations, project- and problem-based groups) are some ways these articulations are made public, and similar activities should be pedagogically central in formal studies, especially in tertiary education. And these can be manifest in multiple and diverse settings across the lifespan. As Smith & Comyn comment, 'Employability skills are developed throughout a person's working life and hence employers need to view the process of employability skills development as a whole-of-workforce issue' (2003: 10).

This is, then, to say in summary, that the accomplishment of employ-abilities depends on two things, and neither of them are lists of generic attributes. First, a prior commitment to undergoing diverse and socially located experiences from which one can learn, and, second, a continuing commitment to the public articulation of reasons for one's judgments at work – one's daily business. Lists of generic skills make no sense unless they show they are grounded in practical judgements and that the reasons practitioners can give for their judgements are publicly articulated amongst their peers.

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