Chapter 5
Workplace Identity, Transition and the Role of Learning

Geoffrey Hinchliffe

I wish to explore, in this chapter, the complex process involved in making transitions into employment. And by employment here, I do not mean simply the business of 'getting a job' but rather what is involved in finding an *occupation* which will sustain a person over a good number of years, if not a lifetime. As a starting point, I propose to take the conclusions of a small piece of research that I undertook, which examined the transition of graduates from university into full-time employment. These moments of transition affect very many people at different points of their lives – changing careers, re-entering work following a period of childcare or even changing employment within an occupation or a related occupation. I will argue that these moments of transition cannot be successfully managed simply through the acquisition of a new bunch of skills and techniques, although this is a very necessary part of what is required. Transitions go much deeper and compel a person to think in terms of their own workplace identity, comprising values, skills and knowledge. Transitions need not occur when one is unemployed, and of course the condition of unemployment (usually involving lack of income) adds its own pressures which may not assist a transition.

This has implications for lifelong learning programmes. Typically, lifelong learning is seen in two different ways. First, we have the programmes inspired by the ideal of liberal learning in which adults undertake a range of subjects 'for their own sake', and often adults take these courses because these subjects are precisely *not* related to their job or occupation. Or lifelong learning is directed towards enhancing employability, for example, by the acquiring of ITC skills or business skills. The upshot of my argument will be that a lifelong learning that does not focus on workplace identity is unlikely to promote in any substantive way the ability

G. Hinchliffe (✉)
Institute for Work Based Learning College House,
Middlesex University, London, UK
e-mail: G.Hinchliffe@uea.ac.uk

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to handle transitions. That is, a lifelong learning that concentrates solely on skills acquisition is unlikely to help those who have embarked on lifelong learning in order to make or consider making a transition in their working lives. Indeed, paradoxically perhaps, they are more likely to be served by a lifelong learning characterised by liberal learning – I will elaborate on this thought in the final section.

It has implications for work-based learning as well, for similar reasons. Work-based learning that is entirely task-focussed and directed only towards skill acquisition will be of relatively little help to those persons who wish to effect a transition, not only into other forms of employment but also a transition of roles within a broader occupational structure. The reason, again, is that learning needs to take account of identity and the need for self-reflection within a suitable framework.

In what follows, I will briefly sketch out a concept of workplace identity that will serve the purposes for a consideration of transition. I will then use the outcome of a small piece of research to elaborate further on the nature of a particular identity in transition, namely, graduate identity. This will clear the way for exploring workplace identity in relation to occupations. Finally, I will consider the extent which the capability theory associated with Amartya Sen helps in thinking about transition and the implications this may have for work-based and lifelong learning.

The Concept of Workplace Identity

The idea of identity in the context of employability has been explored by Len Holmes (2001) through an investigation of *graduate* identity – that period of months (but often years) in which students have left behind their university-learning role but have yet to inhabit an occupational role. Holmes' starting point is a dissatisfaction with the prevailing concept of graduate employability in terms of skills acquisition. The skills approach simply cannot do justice to the complexity of graduateness because of the assumption that skills performance must be measurable and observable. Performance, Holmes suggests, depends upon interpretation of a situation, but this ability to interpret cannot be measured in any straightforward sense. Interpretation itself is a complex activity depending on both understanding a situation in terms of a practice and on agents understanding themselves in terms of their identity in the context of that practice. Thus, a practice provides the site within which identity is constructed. This identity itself is not fixed, since a practice itself may legitimise a series of related identities depending upon context. Furthermore, a practice also provides the site in which identities can be modified, revised and developed.

An identity may be seen in terms of expectations regarding a role, expectations which are normative, technical and epistemological. A precondition of this is the agent's ability to enact a particular practice in terms of learning the language and vocabulary, the goals and purposes and the broader environment in which a practice takes place. However, an identity is not fashioned merely through enactment of a practice. A strong degree of reflexivity is required because the agent starts to inhabit a role with identity at best only partly formed. Some degree of self-reflection is required to make the transition into the new identity based both on reflection in action and on reflection after the event.

A natural reaction to what has been said thus far is to acknowledge the role of identity but to observe, also, that there are as many workplace identities as there are employment roles: the concept 'identity' simply runs into the sand the moment it is grasped. But suppose there were structural features of workplace identity? And suppose these features were based not merely on theorising but also on some degree of empirical research? One way of identifying such features could be based on research that incorporated two variables: the first involving agents undergoing transition, that is, searching for an identity, and the second in which other persons – employers – are looking for persons to inhabit a role or identity. In some ways, recent graduates form a highly appropriate test bed for researching identity. These are persons orientated towards acquiring a role they have yet to inhabit. At the same time, we have employers who are looking to recruit on the basis of *potential* of graduates to acquire a role, and this implies that employers, whether explicitly or tacitly, need to operate with a concept of graduate identity themselves. The small-scale research undertaken on this basis proved to be most revealing in terms of the tacit notion of graduate identity that employers seemed to assume.

Thus, original purpose of the research was to explore graduate identity, but here, having laid out the main findings in this respect, I wish to further explore how concepts of graduate identity may be revealing about workplace identity as well.

Research into Graduate Identity

The research project, which was conducted over 6 months from March–September, 2009, aimed at probing beneath the conventional employability discourse of skills, competencies and attributes by speaking directly to employers. We wanted to hear the employer's voice, differentiated across size and sector. In this way, we would test the feasibility of the concept of graduate identity and find out if employers worked with a tacit or explicit concept of graduate identity. Thus, we could provide both the data and theoretical framework for evaluating the skills-led approach to employability by higher education institutions.[1]

Participants were drawn from small- and medium-sized enterprises, large organisations and public sector bodies predominantly in the county of Norfolk, England. However, national and multinational organisations comprised 12% of the respondents. One hundred and five online surveys were received from a variety of employers, 35 % in public sector. Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) comprised 66.7 % of the responses. Sectors included finance, local government, creative industries, IT, energy, construction, marine engineering and business support. In order to elaborate the responses in the survey, we followed this up with 20 in-depth interviews. Respondents came from a range of roles within organisations, including but not predominantly HR professionals.

[1] For a full account of the research, see Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011).

Since employers naturally use skills-talk in graduate recruitment, we asked a series of questions relating to skills and competencies and then broadened this out to ask about broader attributes relating to values and engagement. The aim was to find out what employer expectations were of graduates and to see if these expectations reached beyond customary talk about skills and employability attributes. Inevitably, we were also told of where graduates fell short of these expectations, but it was not our primary aim to elicit this.

In particular, in the online survey, we used three separate but related instruments in eliciting expectations of graduates. The first of these instruments tested expectations in accordance with well-established recruitment criteria. The second instrument then took a limited number of employability skills (elicited from the first instrument) and obliged the respondent to make a forced ranking. The third then explored the extent to which employers recognised broader, social values typically associated with a university experience.

In the first of these instruments, a series of statements of graduate potential were explored. These statements incorporated a range of accepted employability skills, competencies, attributes and personal qualities based on a survey of recruitment. Table 5.1 ranks each statement according to the percentage of respondents who expected the statement to be evidenced on appointment.

On the basis of these answers, it is clearly those personal ethical qualities of honesty, integrity and trust that are expected at appointment, ahead of any other skill or competence. Moreover, technical skills are not expected to be as highly developed as so-called ‘soft’ skills (e.g. listening skills, ability to integrate). The employer is prepared to wait (for up to a year only) for technical skills to develop (though it should be noted that during interview, it emerged, unsurprisingly, that certain specialist employers, for example, in engineering, did require a range of technical skills at appointment). But for many employers, less is expected regarding technical skills than the one thing that all graduates are presumably good at: the ability to present ideas clearly, both verbally and in writing. Indeed, the ability to demonstrate cultural and social awareness, on appointment, comes ahead of IT skills.

This does not demonstrate, of course, that employers think that technical skills are less important than soft skills. But they *may be* less important when deciding whether a graduate should be offered a job. The graduate must be able to fit quickly into a team, and if this attribute is lacking, they may not get appointed even if their technical skills are highly developed.

Noteworthy too are those statements towards the bottom of the list: for example, universities sometimes pride themselves on introducing research methods into undergraduate programmes, but only 29 % of respondents thought research skills were as important on appointment (though this figure goes up sharply after 1 year, once the employee has been ‘bedded in’). As one would expect, employers are looking for graduates who are self-directed (manage their time, interested in learning and development).

The second instrument takes a selection of skills related to the above statements in order to find out just how much employers are committed to them. In order to achieve this, we asked the employers to indicate their rankings which were, in effect, forced – with the results shown in Table 5.2. The ranking confirms much of what employers

Table 5.1 Employer expectations ranked by preference

Expectation	On appointment (%)	At 1 year (%)	At 3 years (%)
Demonstrates honesty and integrity	98.10	0.90	0.90
Is someone I can trust	94.40	5.60	0.00
Is able to listen to others	93.50	6.50	0.00
Is able to integrate quickly into a team or department	92.60	7.40	0.00
Is able to present ideas clearly, both verbally and in writing	86.10	11.10	2.80
Can assimilate information quickly	84.10	15.90	0.00
Demonstrates good time-management	82.20	17.80	0.00
Can plan and manage their time	79.60	20.40	0.00
Can demonstrate attention to detail and thoroughness	79.60	19.40	0.90
Has a mature attitude	79.20	17.90	2.80
Is willing to take responsibility for their work	78.30	19.80	1.90
Is interested in learning and development	78.30	20.80	0.90
Can share ideas with others	77.80	22.20	0.00
Can demonstrate tact	76.90	20.40	2.80
Demonstrates cultural/social awareness	75.70	20.40	3.90
Has confidence in their own abilities	71.70	25.50	2.80
Is able to take the initiative	71.30	25.90	2.80
Can be relied upon by other members of the team/department	67.30	31.80	0.90
Is capable of learning new IT products and systems quickly	65.10	34.90	0.00
Is willing to take on new challenges and responsibilities	64.50	34.60	0.90
Has relevant technical skills	63.60	29.00	7.50
Thinks critically about their work	63.60	34.60	1.90
Shares the goals and objectives of my organisation	61.70	35.50	2.80
Can report progress to colleagues and managers	61.70	37.40	0.90
Is able to learn about my product/service thoroughly and quickly	59.30	39.80	0.90
Is able to recognise the limits of their responsibilities	58.30	39.80	1.90
Can take responsibility for a piece of work and see it through	57.40	41.70	0.90
Is capable of working without close supervision	57.00	39.30	3.70
Is willing to take on a range of tasks to achieve team goals	54.60	42.60	2.80
Is capable of understanding the structure of the organisation	53.30	45.80	0.90
Is able to communicate ideas about the service/business/product	51.90	47.20	0.90
Can communicate appropriately and effectively with clients/other agencies	50.50	45.80	3.70
Can represent my business well to others	48.10	44.40	7.40

(continued)

Table 5.1 (continued)

Expectation	On appointment (%)	At 1 year (%)	At 3 years (%)
Is able to work unsupervised	46.20	47.20	6.60
Is capable of taking on a broad range of tasks	45.80	44.90	9.30
Quickly gains an undevrstanding of policy and procedure	45.80	54.20	0.00
Can break elements of a job/project down and plan accordingly	43.00	52.30	4.70
Is able to reflect on their own development and identify strengths and weaknesses	42.50	50.90	6.60
Is able to see how my business fits into the wider sector/market place	41.70	56.50	1.90
Can identify the appropriate tools (physical/virtual/administrative)	40.60	53.80	5.70
Can negotiate with others	36.40	53.30	10.30
Can be asked to undertake independent research	29.90	59.80	10.30

Table 5.2 Employer rankings of employability skills

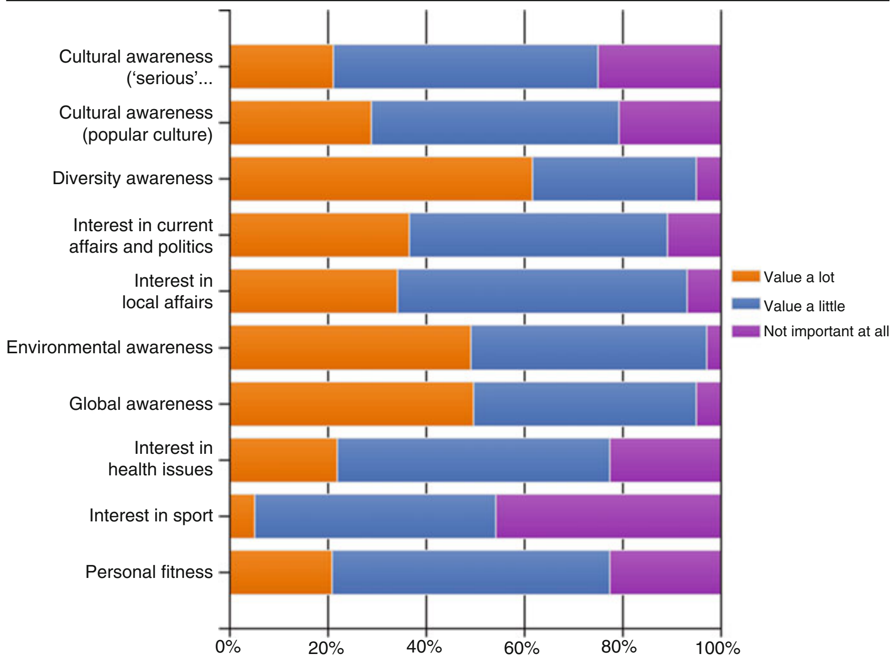
Employability skill	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	6 (%)	7 (%)
Interpersonal skills	57.80	18.90	8.90	8.90	4.40	1.10	0.00
Written communication skills	14.40	28.90	13.40	16.50	17.50	6.20	3.10
IT skills	9.00	15.70	19.10	18.00	14.60	9.00	14.60
Experience of work environment	8.40	8.40	14.70	13.70	13.70	20.00	21.10
Commercial/business awareness	7.50	16.10	14.00	9.70	16.10	12.90	23.70
Numeracy skills	5.50	9.90	19.80	16.50	16.50	18.70	13.20
Presentation skills	1.10	9.70	16.10	17.20	14.00	25.80	16.10

told us about what their expectations were on appointment. Interpersonal skills come out as far ahead of any other skill and, again, written communication comes ahead of IT skills. Note the low priority given to presentation skills – possibly suggesting that academics would be better employed in improving their students' written communication rather than spending hours helping them to hone skills using PowerPoint.

Another surprising finding was the comparatively low ranking accorded to experience of the working environment: when obliged to prioritise, employers found themselves ranking other attributes and skills much more highly. Yet this low ranking was also confirmed at the interview stage, for what employers emphasised, there was the *quality* of the work experience. The implication is that work experience as such may not count for much unless that experience can be translated into a demonstration of, for example, strong interpersonal skills and an ability to reflect on that experience.

Finally, we tried to adopt a different perspective by focussing less on employer requirements and more on the kind of values associated with the university experience. We wanted to find out the extent to which employers recognised the kinds of activities those universities themselves typically value and encourage their

Table 5.3 The value to employers of broader attributes gained through the university experience



undergraduates to develop (e.g. as shown in the corporate plans and mission statements of universities). The results are shown in Table 5.3.

These findings contain a few surprises. For example, we had not expected such a strong endorsement of diversity awareness, although the importance of this had already been flagged up by the first instrument: 75 % of respondents indicated that they expected diversity awareness on appointment. At the interview stage, employers told us that this ranking flowed from the diversity of their customers and clients: the importance of diversity awareness was business driven and was not determined by expectations related to political correctness. By contrast, the comparative indifference with which interest in sport is treated strongly suggests that graduates who list their sporting prowess on their CVs are simply wasting their time – unless they can use this as evidence for demonstrating interpersonal skills. Again, the importance attached to environmental and global awareness flows from a business perspective: this kind of awareness is valued because with it business opportunities are more likely to be generated.

What also emerges, as we shall see, is that the kinds of values that many students and their lecturers espouse and develop are also recognised by employers. Moreover, it was clear from the interview stage that this recognition ranged across all sectors and all types of employers, including SMEs. It was re-enforced by frequent comments by employers on how much they valued a broad-based experience in which graduates, as students, had made the most of all the opportunities available to them

through volunteering, societies and events. Employers were often suspicious of graduates who had used their student experience in a narrow way, merely to recapitulate the experience they brought with them from school and family.

Constructing Graduate Identity

In constructing graduate identity, it is not enough simply to read off employer requirements. For this merely gives us the attribute list approach to employability, whereby skills needed for employment can be duly 'ticked off'. Yet if anything emerges from these findings, it is that employers do indeed think beyond conventional skills discourse and attempt to probe a broader range of graduate experience in order to assess their potential. How, then, should we conceptualise this experience? A heuristic method instantly presents itself: instead of reading off from employer requirements a list of skills, we use these requirements to identify the kinds of graduate *experience* that employers are interested in. And given the findings, four types of experience suggest themselves. First, it is clear from the employer concern with diversity and personal ethics that values are a key component of graduate identity, that is, the extent to which the graduate has engaged with values. Second, it became clear (especially in the longer interviews) that employers value the role of intellect which they see as delivered through discipline-related study. Third, all employers are looking for performance – the ability to deliver results. And finally, it goes without saying, from the persistent high ranking given to interpersonal skills, that employers are looking for evidence of experience of engagement with others across a variety of contexts. Graduate identity, it is suggested, is made up of the four strands of values, intellect, performance and engagement. The precise mix will vary across employers, size and sector, reflecting the distinct nature of each organisation and its structure, 'product' and ethos. The implication of this is that graduates need to be aware of their own identity (or profile) across these four sets of experience. But before discussing how the concept of workplace identity can be developed, I shall first explore the four strands in a little more detail, in the context of the research that was undertaken.

Values

Values include personal ethics, social values and contextual, organisational values, including the value of entrepreneurship. The world of work is sometimes mistakenly seen as a value-free, technocratic domain. Thus, the emphasis placed on personal ethics is not something which is merely given: without this personal commitment and the desire to gain trust, employment rapidly becomes pointless:

> The trust thing is really important because without it we can't have confidence in someone – even leaving someone to lock up if they are last one out is an important sign of trust in them.
>
> IT Manager, International Company

Thus, graduates need to be able to demonstrate they have held positions of trust: it is not assumed that everybody is equally trustworthy. This demonstration of trust often requires a practical commitment.

By social values, I refer to diversity awareness, cultural awareness, interest in the environment and the other values indicated in Table 5.3. As I have already mentioned, the importance placed on these is primarily business driven. But an engagement in social values does not only indicate that a person has a more heightened sense of social responsibility: it indicates to the employer that the graduate who has demonstrated awareness is more likely to be aware of, and respond to, the normative environment in which the business operates. Partly, this is a question of a willingness to espouse all the issues across diversity and equal opportunities that employers have to address. But the normative dimension is also an aspect of the business environment: an employee who is diversity-aware is less likely to miss or neglect real business opportunities.

Thus, some awareness of different cultures, races and religions was important to respondents, recognising that such awareness may bring benefits to the client/customer relationship. Testing these findings at interview, it was also noticeable that diversity awareness was appreciated for and of itself, rather than to fulfil or comply with legislative requirements in the workplace. Such social values were also expressed in terms of respect for others and, more subtly, a respect of status (the individual recognising their need to learn and develop and not to impose ideas and opinions on colleagues or clients).

> It's less because we have to tick [the box], yes we are a diverse organisation, but for me it says more about their mind. If you are culturally aware and aware of diversity you are probably a more rounded person. In our organisation we probably don't have a huge number of external clients, we've got lots of internal clients and being able to meet someone for the first time and assess how you can then develop a rapport with them; its quite important. I think that if you have that awareness, it helps, because you are able to adapt your style… to get the results you want, the answers that you need.
>
> Finance Sector: Multinational

Contextualised values were those shared with the ethos and/or objectives of the organisation, whether it be a shared understanding of demands placed on an SME (e.g. the need to be a flexible and outward-looking employee) or a shared understanding of the broader aims of the organisation (e.g. in providing a service to clients). Such shared values were particularly central to younger, smaller organisations that relied, in part, on the strength of a small team and the benefit that a shared vision might bring to its success.

Intellect

Intellectual rigour was seen by employers primarily in terms of an ability to think critically, analyse and communicate information, reflect on all aspects of their work and bring challenge and ideas to an organisation. Again, intellect can take many forms in the mind of the employer but may be best defined as creative, situational or applied and reflective.

Intellectual curiosity and creative approach (particularly to problem solving) are elements of the graduate identity that are especially valued by medium-sized organisations and those with a structured graduate route. These respondents (at interview) viewed the graduate development process as an opportunity for trainees to apply their recent experience of learning, questioning and testing to a new environment. Therefore, the need for enthusiastic individuals who offer fresh ideas was paramount and reflected this desire for intellectual curiosity:

> I want people who can think who can paint pictures and communicate that, and be prepared to have discussion and debate and dialogue and argument.
>
> Construction Sector: Departmental Manager

With regard to applied or situational intellect, the knowledge base developed through study at a higher level was significant for particular sectors, for example, IT (requiring a sound understanding of the principles of programming) or engineering (where a measurable technical skill set is required). The size and sector of each business had a profound effect on the value of applied intellect, with the more technical/professional organisations requiring (and sometimes expressing concern over) the quality and ability to apply knowledge as graduates enter employment. Partly, this concern was with the ability to work at the appropriate level of detail and accuracy:

> Accuracy is imperative in our field. In education establishments, errors in calculations may be acceptable to an extent but in the real world no errors can be allowed – 95% is not enough.
>
> Civil Engineering SME

Implicit in this concern was the need for awareness by the graduate that their knowledge or skill may not be of the required standard (that there is more learning to be done) and that they were then capable of acting on this. Such awareness did not apply only to technical skills and knowledge but to general commercial awareness and independence in 'learning about the job'.

Employers recognised the central role that university plays in developing intellect, but inherent in this is also the ability to broaden thinking and reflect on learning and development. Thus, the capacity to reflect appeared to be one of the fundamental requirements of employers, influencing, as it does, the graduate's ability to make choices about and develop their own careers, operate well in a team and with clients, identify development and training needs and assess the efficacy of their own work.

Performance

Performance may be usefully defined as the application of skills and intellect in the workplace, and for the graduate, this equates to the ability to learn quickly and effectively and to develop skills appropriate to the role. Performance is therefore most closely aligned to the established employability skills matrix that dominates current definitions of graduate identity. Performance is about delivery and results. In this respect, the survey interrogated employability skills both implicitly (embedded in competency statements in Section One of the survey) and explicitly (requiring respondents to rank commonly accepted employability skills).

> When I think about it, it all boils to the ability to communicate. I think that's really the key for me when I recruit. You've got to have a 2:1, get through the numeric tests, through the telephone interview which tests your commercial awareness. But even when we get people at the assessment centre you know that they are not going to get through, because they don't have the ability to communicate…
>
> UK Graduate Recruitment Manager: Multinational

Employers generally expressed confidence in the graduates' ability to take a foundation of skills gained at university and apply them in a new setting: for example, the knowledge of IT languages could be applied in order to learn new programmes. However, there were notable concerns about core skills. For example, attention to detail and thoroughness was required by 80 % of employers on appointment. Yet both those surveyed and those interviewed expressed some concern over the ability of graduates to check and revise their work.

Engagement

What came across strongly at the interview stage was a desire by employers to see some kind of evidence that graduates have engaged in work experience, in volunteering and in making the most out of the student experience and have shown a preparedness to step outside the familiar and the comfortable. However, what employers also want to see is that this has been done over a sustained period and has not been merely haphazard. They are looking, in other words, for engagement in communities of practice, whether these be work-based communities, virtual communities or social communities. In this way, the graduate will have had to learn a different kind of discourse through the very act of participation itself.

This is the kind of situated learning that Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) have shown that involves systematic participation and engagement in which:

- Often much of what is to be learnt is not written down.
- Learning affects and transforms attitudinal and behavioural response.
- Learning often requires the development of relatively sophisticated interpersonal skills.
- There is always a codependency on others so that learning never belongs solely to the individual but its nature is sharable.
- Respect and recognition arise through sustained participation.
- Awareness of context (which itself may shift and change) is vital if successful learning and interaction are to take place.

Whilst graduates are not expected to demonstrate a sustained engagement with a community of practice over several years, employers do indeed expect some limited engagement with such a community, and to demonstrate an awareness that learning does not only arise through traditional disciplinary engagement. It is the experience, albeit limited, of a community of practice that enables an employer to assess those all-important interpersonal skills.

From Graduate Identity to Workplace Identity

The suggestion, therefore, is that the four dimensions of graduate identity can be used to think about workplace identity. The purpose of the research had been to test if employers worked with a tacit concept of graduate identity. Yet this concept of graduate identity did not arise, I suggest, out of some prior, preformed notion of 'graduateness'. Rather, what employers were doing was operating with a concept of workplace identity and then modifying it in the light of expectations of those who had recently left university with a degree. Hence, it seems reasonable that every statement that can be applied to graduates can also be applied more generally to workplace identity. Values, intellect, performance and engagement are attributes of role in the workplace and clearly are not confined to those who are graduates. The status of being a graduate often does not last long – sometimes only a few months if that. That is, one ceases to be a graduate and one becomes an accountant, a teacher, a journalist and an engineer, even if one is seen to be still in a trainee role. But the attributes of workplace identity, exemplified by the four strands or dimensions, do not disappear. In fact, they become stronger, as evidenced by the first instrument when we look at expectations after 3 years.

These theses about identity may seem somewhat overblown if workplace identity is simply thought of in terms of a 'job', that is, in terms of a series of tasks with measurable deliverables. But if we think in terms of 'occupation', then the dimensions of identity take on a greater significance. Chris Winch, in his book *Dimensions of Expertise*, discusses the concept of occupation, drawing on German concept of *Beruf* (= profession or occupation). Winch argues that *Beruf* implies a series of characteristics. Some of these are readily recognisable, such as task-related skills and techniques. But it also includes broader-based abilities relating to the planning, communicating and coordination of work, the deployment of systematic knowledge (both technical and theoretical if needs be) and finally a series of normative dispositions including 'the ability to take responsibility for one's work, to develop personal characteristics of commitment to moral values, and to take responsibility for the consequences of the practice of one's occupation in a wider social and political context' (Winch 2010, p. 73–74). Now, I would argue that our research suggests that employers themselves are much more inclined to think in terms of occupation and *Beruf* if we take seriously the range of attributes and expectations they have in respect of workplace role.

Thus, if we think about occupation in a more rounded sense, then we can see that it is underpinned by the four dimensions of workplace identity. Of course, in the actual undertaking of a role, some or even all of the dimensions may be brought into play at the same time. For example, the need for intellectual and technical accuracy noted above could be also be seen as an aspect of performance, and certain values may be manifested in engagement. Particular agent-driven events may see all four dimensions enacted together. When, however, an agent is thinking about what workplace identity he or she needs to adopt – what would be most suitable and what their preferences

are during times of transition into employment or crossing employment sector boundaries – then the dimensions of identity provide a framework for reflection.

The need to undertake deliberation in order to establish and develop a workplace identity assumes that agents are what is sometimes termed 'strong evaluators'. Charles Taylor has, perhaps, done most to develop this concept of the self (see Taylor 1985 passim, but especially Chap. 1 for an introduction the concept of strong evaluation). Taylor explains that 'weak evaluation' is only concerned with the evaluation of the best means to attain pre-given ends (e.g. ends delivered through desires), whereas strong evaluation seeks to shape and modify existing ends. I suggest, then, that the self of workplace identity be viewed as a strong evaluator in Taylor's sense. Such a person requires a complex informational base in order to make decisions about one's occupation, decisions that bring into play the four dimensions. Needless to say, the precise 'mix' between, say, engagement and knowledge will depend on the requirements of an occupation under consideration. The agent is deliberating partly on which workplace identity seems best to suit his or her preferences and also – and crucially – the extent to which he is able to develop an appropriate set of value commitments or set of knowledge-driven competencies. The informational set is complex, not least because questions of pecuniary reward and holiday entitlement may be at best one factor amongst many. But for the weak evaluator, the latter may assume proportions of great significance.

A useful way of interpreting the idea of workplace identity that we have been elaborating is through the concept of capability, drawing on the work of Amartya Sen. When he first theorised the concept of capability, Sen suggested (in the context of asking questions about social redistribution) that perhaps we should focus not so much on goods and resources as what people could actually *do* (Sen 1982, p. 365–367). This idea was further theorised by Sen in terms of 'functionings' or modes of being and doing. The idea is that a capability can enable a range of possible functionings (Sen 1999, p. 74–75). A 'capability set' is therefore, according to Sen, a combination of functionings. The key point here is that there is no one-to-one correlation between capability and functions – capabilities enable a range of functionings. It follows that the development of capabilities has an empowering dimension: capabilities enable persons to do more with their lives in terms of potential functionings. For Sen, the concept of capability therefore includes a normative dimension that goes beyond standard human capital theories: a capability set becomes an index of freedom and well-being.

In terms of workplace identity, then, there is a complex capability set that encompasses values, social engagement, intellect and performance which enable a range of functionings. Capabilities in this normative sense do not prescribe functionings but provide *opportunities* for functioning (Sen 1993). What Sen's thoughts on capability suggest is this: that the development of workplace identity need not be thought of in terms of developing a set of instrumental skills and attitudes aligned to human capital requirements, entirely divorced from questions of well-being. For Sen, the development of a capability set is central to human well-being, and so, for us, the development of workplace identity is also central to occupational well-being.

Thus, workplace identity can be explored and developed through functionings afforded by a capability set across the four dimensions of identity. In some ways, this account of capability overlaps with Winch's account of 'occupational capacity' which encompasses 'both theoretical and practical knowledge, together with the exercise, by the agent, of autonomy and responsibility' (Winch 2010, p. 192). And elsewhere in his book, Winch makes clear (p. 79–80) that such a capacity also includes the normative activities of interpretation, justification and explanation. However, I am concerned about the development of workplace identity that needs to go on before a full occupational identity is inhabited by the agent. Capabilities enable the development of an identity *in transition* towards the adoption of an occupational role.

Developing Workplace Identity

We can now see that lifelong learning programmes constructed along narrow employability lines (equipping learners with ITC skills, business skills and technical competencies) will fall short. Such programmes will at best encourage the formation of only partial workplace identities because certain crucial aspects (e.g. normative capabilities orientated towards exploring values and engagement) of possible future workplace roles will be lacking. Moreover, a lifelong learning which *does* take seriously the role of self-reflection in the development of identity for those whose lives in transition will need to go beyond empiricist-based reflective learning (see Kolb 1984). 'Reflection on experience' is not going to take one too far if one's experience has been at best mixed and drawn from a relatively narrow range of functionings. Thus, it may be that a lifelong learning that actually does contain elements of more traditional liberal learning may facilitate transition. The reason is that the range of experiences required in order for an agent to think through the four dimensions of identity may need to be enhanced. What the enthusiasts of 'learning through doing' sometimes fail to understand is that liberal learning may actually serve to *increase* the ambit of experience. Philosophy, literature and history (the traditional staple of liberal learning programmes) serve to expand horizons: experiential learning serves merely to confirm experiences already undergone.

Some of these considerations also apply to workplace learning as well. Of course, it is perfectly true that much of the literature on workplace learning has left the behaviourist training model well behind. For example, the role of *integrated* learning (reflecting occupational capacity) has been termed as 'organic learning' and seeks to structure experience in terms of reasons, values and motives (Beckett 1999, p. 86–91). However, I would suggest that when workplaces are undergoing transition which has implications for changes to workplace identities, then learning and reflection may require the agent to step outside his or her customary role and examine the changing nature of that identity, using the four dimensional concept of identity

as a framework. And that may require, as I have argued, learning some philosophy or history or literature. The reason for this is that because distance can aid perspective in reflection on one's own circumstances. However, distance by itself may change little if it simply means that the vocabulary customarily associated with a workplace practice continues to be used. What may seem strange or unfamiliar is desensitised and rapidly assimilated into conventional talk. What really needs to happen is that a new vocabulary is learnt as well so that understanding of the piece of literature comes *from the inside.*

For example, take Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*. The theme of the book is change. Or rather, as it states, 'to stay the same one has to learn to change'. Yet the book is as far removed from any contemporary change-management scenario as possible, set as it is in Sicily in 1860. The book details the painful compromises that must be made by an aristocracy if it is to survive and even more painfully how persons hitherto treated with disdain (the rising bourgeoisie) now must be treated with respect. At the same time, the book lets us know what does not change – the ferocious rainless summers and the pitiless, rocky, inhospitable earth. And then, towards the end of the book, we are shown some of the characters in their old age, at the turn of the century, and how they themselves view the changes that have occurred in their lives over the years and how for them some of the struggles, once deemed important, now appear petty and distant. The feeling created at the book's end is one of resolute survival tempered by a strong sense of fragility. Now, I suggest that when change comes to the workplace – as it always does – we will be better prepared for it through a reading of *The Leopard*, but in order to achieve this, we must take ourselves out of our times and firmly immerse ourselves in the mid-nineteenth century in Southern Italy. We will find doing this, in the end, both more enjoyable and more instructive than any number of books on change management.[2]

Once we embrace an enriched role of workplace identity in the way I have described (aided powerfully by the reflections of Chris Winch), then we can start to take a broader, richer view of what workplace learning might involve. And we might also start to learn that sometimes the best way to think about work is to get away from it completely for a time.

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[2] I give some more examples as follows:

1. Aristotle's account of phronesis and why, to be a practical man (or woman) of action, you need to also reflect on your values.
2. Hegel's dialectic of recognition and how this forms the basis of respect in the workplace.
3. J.K. Galbraith's *The Great Crash* (an account of hubris in the workplace).
4. Nietzsche's account of asceticism and the role of self-denial: what part does this play in the ethics of the workplace? See *Beyond Good and Evil*.

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