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Rethinking generic skills

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Abstract

The paper provides a critical analysis of the notion of generic or transversal skills contained within European Union policy discourses. The author presents a conceptual framework that challenges the idea that generic skills are universal, transferable and autonomous. An alternative analysis is put forward that argues the case for contextualising skills and knowledge within particular understandings and cultures that are more collective than individualistic in nature. The arguments are framed within wider cross-disciplinary debates in linguistics, geosemiotics and social-cultural theory and build upon an earlier paper exploring core skills in the UK (Canning, 2007).

Keywords: adult education; generic skills; Europe; language; competences

Introduction

In an early contribution to the debate on work-based skills, Wolf (1991, 2011) suggests that it would be a ‘wild goose chase’ to attempt to isolate and assess any generic notion of skills. Her argument rested on the assumption that generic skills can only be understood as situated practices and, therefore, that no reliable assessment can be made of them at different levels of ability. It was a persuasive argument at the time, yet largely unheeded by UK and European Union policy-makers in subsequent years.

Much of the literature on generic and transversal skills is descriptive and advocacy in nature. Rather surprisingly, there is little of it that attempts to theorise the nature of generic skills and even less that challenges existing theorisations (Barrow, 1991; Beckett, 2004). In this paper, I will explore the conceptual argument for adopting a decontextualized notion of generic skills. This theorisation of the concept will draw upon a wider cross-disciplinary literature, particularly from the fields of linguistics and social-cultural theories. Finally, although the paper does not offer an empirical analysis of generic skill practices, links will be made between theory and practice in exploring and developing generic skills within a European context, with particular reference to adult education.

Generic skills

Within the policy-making discourse, generic skills are generally taken to mean a set of discrete clusters of skills or competencies, normally at a foundation level, that are transferable across different work contexts (European Communities, 2007). They are usually distinguished from basic skills and, it is claimed, can be identified and assessed at varying levels of ability. Although these clusters of skills and knowledge change over time, they have become increasingly identified with the work-based practices of communication, working with others, numeracy, problem solving and information technology. The theoretical argument in support of the concept of generic skills rests mainly on the twin ideas that skill sets reside within the individual and are transferable across boundaries. This notion of a transporting phenomenon seems intuitive enough, particularly when applied to contexts that are identical in nature. This process is represented in Figure 1:

Object -----Artefact-----Subject

Figure 1. Generic skills

The underlying notion here is that the generic skills (object) being transported are decontextualized, and thus unproblematic in nature. These skills are normally partially represented within artefacts such as texts and software technology. This makes it possible, in turn, to enclose and partition the clusters of skills in a manner that will allow the profiling of the subject, and the subsequent analysis of skill deficits.

The theoretical arguments underpinning this particular analysis of generic skills have, however, come under criticism over the years. Firstly, the notion of transfer has been seen to be highly problematic. There is little convincing evidence to support the argument that skills can be transported across contexts even at the most rudimentary of levels (Cree, Macaulay & Loney, 1998). Indeed, this is still the case even when the notion of transfer is conceptualised within a polycontextual framework of boundary crossing, rather than within a behaviourist paradigm (Tuomi-Grohn & Engeström, 2003). The idea that skills are not easily transferred across contexts may seem, at first glance, to be somewhat counter-intuitive. However, it is difficult to identify even basic replicative knowledge that is transportable in this manner. The suggestion that more complex skills are, somehow, embedded within an individual and automatically transferred across a range of contexts remains highly implausible. Indeed, the concept of transfer is probably better understood as a metaphorical discourse than an empirical phenomenon (Edwards, Nicoll, Solomon & Ushers, 2004).

A second strand of criticism of the transportable notion of generic skills is that the very concept itself is socially constructed. Over the years, the meaning of generic skills has continually changed, reflecting social, political and economic trends. For instance, in the 1980s, language education was central to any discourse on generic skills in Europe, while in the 1990s, enterprise education became much more prominent. Both have subsequently been eclipsed by the softer skills of teamwork and learning to learn. Post-feminists have also argued that the concept of skill is highly gendered and offers a masculine perspective of the world of work. Indeed, in many ways the 'concept of

skill has become bigger, broader and much fuzzier around the edges' (Warhurst, Grugulis & Keep, 2004, p. 14). Definitions of generic skills are, therefore, contested and the concept has increasingly become imbued with notions of emotive and aesthetic labour, and in turn, tangled up with attributes and dispositions.

Finally, a third criticism of generic skills derives from how learning is conceptualised. In recent reviews of the literature on work-based learning (Cullen, Hadjivassiliou, Hamilton, Kelleher, Sommerland & Stern, 2002; Fuller & Unwin, 2011), it is suggested that there is an emerging consensus on the importance of socio-cultural theories of learning. The theoretical work on 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and 'activity theory' (Engeström, 2001) has had a strong influence on how we think about learning in the workplace. The focus of learning has moved from the individual to the collective and from the abstract to the particular. This is not to deny the agency of the individual in the learning process, but to acknowledge the subject's often complex interchange with the collective. Increasingly, the literature is thus foregrounding the importance of the situatedness of practice and the dialogical interface between agency and structure.

These theoretical developments have a resonance with the work of Boreham (2004), who coins the concept of 'collective competence' as central to any understanding of the nature of learning at work. This socio-cultural conceptualisation of learning challenges our liberal humanist notions of the individual as a receptor of knowledge and, in turn, focuses our attention on collective activities that are context bound and situated.

In summary, the argument that has secured the foundation of a generic concept of skills, the transfer of learning, has become rather unconvincing in the light of recent research on both the theory of learning, and knowledge reproduction within organisational practices.

Reconceptualising generic skills

In many ways it is a more straightforward process to deconstruct a concept than it is to construct it in the first place. However, in the case of generic skills, the tools we have used to do the former will, in turn, be very useful in helping us to do the latter. The starting point is language and the way that we represent objects in the world (Johansen & Larsen, 2002). In Figure 2, below, the object in question are the day-to-day situated work-based practices that occur within a range of contexts.

In semiotic terms the object is polygonal, dispersed and situated; *multiple practices* (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Fenwick, 2010) that are embedded within social and work structures. However, these practices 'are not the same in every context and are often better understood as existing in the relations between people rather than residing in individuals' (Barton et al., 2000, p. 8). They are also typically a means to some end rather than an end in themselves (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In linguistic terms they are the signified, vernacular and situated objects of everyday practice. However, we represent objects in the world through the use of signs in order to conceptualise our thoughts and engage in discourse with others.

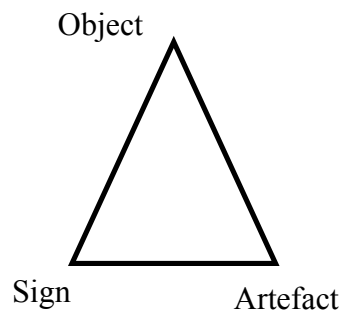


Figure 2. Semiotics and generic skills

Language plays an important role in this respect as a signifier of the object. However, the sign is not the object. In this case the sign (generic skills) is decontextualized and signals a complete independence of its placement in the world. This is not to say that there is no link between a sign and its object:

A sign can in fact resemble the object (icon), it can point to or be attached to the object (index), or it can only be arbitrarily or conventionally associated with the object (symbol). (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 26)

In the case of generic skills, the most likely connection between sign and object is a *symbol* representing the socially constructed nature of the discourse. Indeed it could be argued that there is multiple signs being employed here, each reflecting a shifting and unstable notion of the underlying object.

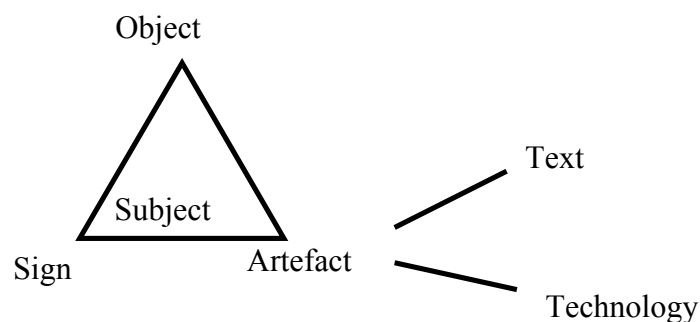


Figure 3. Objects, signs and artefacts

Artefacts

An artefact is commonly used to mediate between the sign and the subject (Figure 3)—for example, a qualifications framework or software programme of key competencies. The artefacts are typically text based or likely to incorporate technology applications. However, an important point here is that artefacts are never value free or neutral. They are embedded with the norms and assumptions that are implicit in how we think about the object. For instance, a highly gendered notion of appropriate working times

contained within a diarised work schedule. Artefacts can also be embedded with notions of the universal. This is typically represented in European debates on qualification frameworks (Cedefop, 2010a) and learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2010b). Interestingly, we can also have an artefact that is a text within a text. For instance, generic skill texts have been subsumed within curriculum texts as part of Scottish Vocational Education qualifications. They are described as front-ended sub-texts and are used in signposting intended generic skill outcomes. This *intertextuality* is a feature of curriculum development in Scotland and, rather interestingly, aligns with the intuitive idea of situating practice within a context, albeit a text within a text.

Artefacts can also be software technology applications. Like texts, these also embody socio-cultural constructs. Although this is not a form of hard determinism, in a technological sense, it is a type of soft determinism that incorporates implicit notions of power relationships and the social shaping of technology (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999). Often these artefacts are adopted at a local level, for example, using generic skill profiling applications when screening new students into adult education programmes. Rarely are the underlying assumptions of the social shaping of the technology unpacked or deconstructed in this process.

When conceptualising generic skills as decontextualised and abstract objects, the subject is often counter-imposed as an autonomous entity embodying transportable skills. This passive subject is then profiled against the object, normally through the use of an artefact, and skill deficits are identified that are in need of remedy. This institutional normalisation of the individual is then completed when the subject is partitioned within certificated chunk-sized learning blocks that attract funding. Although this process is largely accepted as the norm within educational institutions, debate continues amongst adult education practitioners as to whether these generic skill clusters can be taught as stand-alone modules (discrete texts) or need to be embedded within broader curriculum subject areas (intertextuality). The argument is, of course, meaningless as it assumes that the sign (generic skills) is indeed the object. The subject within this discourse then becomes problematic and identified as de-motivated or resistant. The normalisation of language is important in this context (Milana, 2012). For example, the nouns completion and retention are often used to describe successful institutional outcomes for students on certificated courses. However, both terms avoid any consideration of agency and normalise failure in terms of the subject. If we use the active verb of retained then this raises the question of who is doing the retaining and for what purpose. This normalisation of language has the added advantage of directing attention away from any possible systemic structural failures that may be ascribed to how generic skills are conceptualised and institutionalised within formal educational practices.

In summary, it is argued that signs represent objects in the world. These signs, however, are not the objects in question. They represent the object and may, indeed, be accepted as resembling the object to which they refer but they are constructions that provide us, at best, with a useful language or discourse. A danger here is that we start to believe that the signs are, indeed, the objects and can be used, through the mediation of artefacts, to profile and direct the subject.

Symbolic structures

A central argument of geosemiotics is that exactly *where* an activity takes place is an important part of its meaning (emplacement). If generic skills are theorised as transferable, decontextualised and unproblematic then they will be located in space and time as centred and timeless objects—in effect, as autonomous narratives encapsulating an objectified knowledge. It is a small step from here to then using artefacts to delineate, segregate and shape educational practice. The sign thus becomes the object and the subject, in turn, is then counter-posed as problematic and resistant, as they search for meaning where there is none. The artefacts are shaped within this model as alerting, diagnostic and placing tools and are often infiltrated into texts and sub-texts to assess ability.

If generic skills are reconceptualised as situated practices that are derived from where and how they are placed in the world then they become located in space and time as decentred and time-bound objects—in effect, as collective narratives embodying sociocultural practices that are localised and situated. The artefacts used in conjunction with these situated signs have an entirely different purpose. They are not there as delineating processes, but are used in a manner that will help our understanding of how generic skills can ‘support, sustain, guide or impede learning and skill development’ (Barton et al., 2000, p. 12). For instance, a learning journal based on a work experience activity. Here we attempt to both understand how people currently use generic skills in their everyday practices and, in turn, *how* and *where* we can immerse them in situated practices that will further develop these skills. The sign, in this scenario, is still not the object, but suggests a number of congruent and parallel practices that are particular and situated in nature.

I have argued previously that the relationship between sign and the object in generic skills is symbolic. This is recognised as part of the generic skill discourse, which as a social construction is both shifting and unstable. The notion of generic skills itself also suffers from a number of linguistic confusions, whereby it is often conflated with other terms that are distinctively different (basic skills) or converges with similar concepts that are nuanced in different ways (transversal skills). If generic skills are read as discursive practices, then any artefact that is used to mediate an object is both ‘ideal’ and ‘material’:

Artefacts exhibit a dual nature in that they are simultaneously ideal and material. Their creators and users exhibit a corresponding duality of thought, at once grounded in the material here and now, yet simultaneously capable of entertaining the far away, the long ago, and the never has-been. (Cole, 1994, p. 94)

The more the artefact represents the local and situated, then the more likely it is to embody historical and socio-cultural aspects of practice (Daniels, 2001). Those in adult education often intuitively know this when they facilitate the process of informal learning (McGivney, 1999; European Union, 2012). However, if the artefact is embodied with notions of the abstract and transferable then it will be difficult to locate and engage with situated practices (objects). The best example of this type of dissonance was in the use of competence-based standards of education and training in the UK. These highly prescriptive narratives of learning outcomes became teaching and assessment texts within a ‘tick-box’ curriculum, often simply resulting in the recycling of past competences (Canning, 1999).

It is entirely possible to look in the situated context for skills; the artefact and skill are both situated and contextualised. For example congruent interchanges between object and artefact can be found within existing educational practices in adult education

centres. In community centres, adults can participate in productive and purposeful work experience programmes that include guided support from mentors. What is important here is *where* and *how* these material experiences are gained and whether they are interpreted as reflecting authentic and non-exploitative educational practices that are situated and contextualised (Fuller & Unwin, 2003).

In summary, once the meta-narrative world of the abstract concept of ‘generic skills’ is vacated, then there is a need to grapple with the micro-analytic social–power relations of everyday professional practice. In doing so, it is possible to develop an account of how to relate symbolic structures conceptually to the actual practices and experiences of situated subjects (Kogler, 1999, p. 3).

In the first instance, this means recognising the ‘tendency of language to extinguish itself as it brings the thing itself into language’ (Kogler, 1999, p. 39). By conceptualising generic skills as transferable objects practitioners have ‘submerged through self-evidence’ (Kogler, 1999, p. 28) the very situated and decentred work-based practices that are of theoretical and practical interest—in effect creating symbolic structures that enclose the subject.

Not unsurprisingly, symbolic structures impact directly upon educational practices, particularly in the areas of pedagogy and accreditation. If generic skills are conceived of as abstract objects then it would be legitimate to teach and assess them as stand-alone decontextualised skills. Likewise, if they were embedded generic skills then it would be plausible to submerge them within existing curricula and assess them by proxy on the achievement of qualifications. However, if generic skills are recognised as representations of objects then an *immersion* pedagogy of educational placements would be more appropriate, to enable students to engage productively with the multiple and diverse socio-cultural practices that are situated within workplaces.

European policy dimensions

Policy development in adult and vocational education in the EU has tended to support the use of generic skills, competence-based standards and learning outcome approaches to education and training. These outcome-based methodologies have been used in conjunction with diagnostic assessment tools in the form of accreditation of prior learning technologies and ECVET modular systems. In order to help navigate this often messy and complex terrain of EU curricula offerings we have been presented with a new array of signs and symbols that have been embedded within essentialist and abstract concepts of skills and competences. For instance, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is characterised by the notions of seamless progression, equivalences and common flexible curricula architectures. In practice there is little evidence to date to suggest that these symbolic structures are anything more than ideal and representational. Indeed it could be argued that meaning collapses in the representation of generic skills as real. For example when stand-alone Key Skills were introduced in England under Curriculum 2000 (Hodgson, Spours & Waring, 2011). In Scotland, policy-making has been somewhat more circumspect. No attempt was made to assess stand-alone generic skills given the resistance by teachers. However, not to be deterred, a policy of embedding generic skills within a neoliberal notion of the curriculum was pursued and institutionalised within the 14–19 curriculum. This, in turn, has led to students being given formal recognition for embedded core skills that they have no awareness of ever doing. Interestingly, a recent decision taken in England to abolish National Vocational

Qualifications (NVQs), the iconic competence-based awards that instigated the new-vocationalism in the the UK, could be interpreted as a a case of systemic policy failure. This at a time when outcome-based qualifications and the concept of competence has taken hold in the EU.

In summary, the European literature challenges us to think about how we conceptualise skills and competences within a broader set of cultural perogatives. It does so by questioning and problematizing the notion that skills can be transversal and decontextualized. It highlights the productivity of understandings of local, situated practices and thus of the acknowledgement and cognisance of the micro-political and social-cultural aspects of learning at work. A good example of this process is the space given to member countries in the EU to define and enact the concept of competence in a manner that is meaningful to them within local contexts. It also challenges us to continually problematize the use of representational ontologies that depict and mobilise technologies and artifacts in adult education. Instead, it potentially offers a collective and negotiated platform for promoting learning.

Conclusions

The paper, through reviewing the literature from linguistics, geosemiotics and socio-cultural theory, has argued against adopting an essentialist and abstract notion of generic or transversal skills. Instead it encourages us to pay more attention to how we use language and where and how objects are placed within the world. This, in turn, focuses our attention to the particular and embedded opportunities for learning e.g situated practices. However, it needs to be acknowledged that there are limitations to using a semiotic of significations model as we remain within a representationalist ontology: things still stand for other things. We need in other words to go beyond the use of language and the picture theory of truth. This requires us to replace concern with meaning by concern with use (Wittgenstein, 1958). It is where meaning has been written into things and not layered over them (Wittgenstein, 1958). It also acknowledges that the particular and universal can co-habit the same space and time. That one need not exist only in the absence of the other or as Brandom (2008) would claim a set of doings and sayings that reflect both use and meaning.

So why, then, do these ideas of transferable decontextualised generic skills persist? Perhaps this is more of a sociological question and as Young (2000, p. 524) points out, ‘fundamentally flawed ideas persist because they have powerful social functions in society’. In this case they reflect both employer interests and a technical rationality approach to educational practices. It does seem likely, therefore, that the ‘wild goose chase’ will persist as those involved continue to entertain ‘the far away, the long ago, and the never has-been’ (Cole, 1994, p. 94) notion of generic skills.

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