Reconsidering Graduate Employability: the 'graduate identity' approach

LEN HOLMES

The Business School, University of North London, London N7 8DB, UK

ABSTRACT *This paper attempts to elaborate a cogent alternative to the skills agenda as an approach to graduate employability. This alternative is based on two things: first, a conceptual and theoretical analysis of the nature of human behaviour; and second, the claim that situated behaviour can only be properly understood by interpreting activity as performance-of-a-kind. Such interpretation depends upon there being a set of social practices and a set of identities appropriate to the social situation. This analysis of employability leads to suggestions for undergraduate curriculum enhancement.*

Introduction

In contrast to the currently-dominant skills agenda, this article seeks to present an alternative approach for understanding graduate employability, termed here the 'graduate identity' approach. The debate on graduate employability has, over the past decade or so, been dominated by the discourse of skills, and the various terms are now a familiar part of the vocabulary of discussions concerned with higher education policy and practice. In the UK, the once-popular 'transferable skills' has given way, post-Dearing (NCIHE, 1997), to 'key skills'. 'Core skills', 'generic skills', 'personal skills' and 'employability skills' (CVCP, 1998) are also used, along with 'capabilities' and 'personal competencies'. Similar terms are adopted in higher education systems elsewhere. However, despite such variety in the vocabulary, there tends to be a widespread assumption amongst proponents of the 'skills agenda' (Fallows & Steven, 2000) that the terms are broadly synonymous and that the emphasis upon skills is a matter of common sense (Murphy & Otter, 1999).

Despite the considerable body of critical literature (Wolf, 1991; Bridges, 1992; Barnett, 1994; Holmes, 1999, 2000), the skills agenda continues to be promoted in policy, at national and institutional level. Apart from those staff whose positions and careers are tied to the development of skills approaches, there may, arguably, be limited support amongst higher education teaching staff generally (Bennett, *et al.*, 2000). However, without a cogent alternative approach to employability, criticism of the skills agenda may be taken as being an 'old-fashioned' and impractical, even élitist and contrary to the interests of students in the contemporary higher education system. The hope is that the cogent alternative presented here will make a significant contribution to the debate on graduate employability, raising it beyond the limitations of the skills agenda.

It should be noted that this paper accepts that the purposes of higher education, and the measures of quality, include some form of preparation for entry to and performance within

post-graduation employment, as noted by the Robbins and Dearing Committees (NCIHE, 1997). However, the substantial critiques of the skills agenda pose serious difficulties for attempts to promote employability on the precepts of the skills agenda. There is no attempt to elaborate those critiques here; instead the focus is on the elaboration of the alternative, 'graduate identity' approach. This will take the form of a conceptual and theoretical examination of the key notion of performance, through which the twin concepts of practices and identity will be shown to be of significance for understanding human behaviour. This examination leads to suggestions for curriculum improvement intended to help students gain entry into and be successful in graduate employment.

The Primacy of Performance

Part of the problem with the skills agenda and initiatives in higher education is that they assume that the term 'skill' has the same meaning when used in an educational context as when used in an employment context. Perhaps part of the 'common sense' appeal of the skills agenda is our familiarity with the term 'skill' in everyday, mundane discourse. However, the assumption that the term has the same meaning in discourse as when used in relation to employee performance, or in educational discourse, is unwarranted (Holmes, 2000).

Despite the rhetoric surrounding the skills agenda, it is by no means clear that employers should want skills *per se*; rather, they want the graduates they recruit and employ to perform in desirable ways—competently and effectively. It is the behaviour, or performance that is required. Employers also talk about the sort of person they want, for example, 'proactive', 'a self-starter', 'confident', 'enthusiastic' and so on. These are sometimes rendered as 'characteristics' or 'attributes' (Harvey *et al.*, 1997), but the use of such terms may be regarded as meaning nothing more than that the employer has expectations about how graduates go about their work, about how they perform.

The starting point for the analysis should, therefore, be with performance or behaviour by graduates in graduate jobs. The issue, then, is that of how someone becomes employed as a graduate; and, more generally, what happens to individuals after they graduate, in their search for appropriate employment. It is clear that the trajectory into such employment is not a straightforward one for many graduates (Purcell & Hogarth, 1999; Pearson *et al.*, 2000). The skills agenda provides little help in understanding the complexity of post-graduation career trajectories, for it assumes that the process of gaining a job is simply a matter of matching skills required and skills possessed. Whilst survey-based research may provide large-scale information, what is also needed is a way of framing, in conceptual and theoretical terms, the interactional processes by which a graduate and prospective employer engage with each other, and the outcomes of such interactions. Only when we have a better understanding of this, of graduates getting in and getting on, shall we be able to engage in evidence-based curriculum development and devise other modes of support, thus enhancing the quality of higher education in respect of employability.

Understanding Performance

A key problem with the skills agenda is that it assumes that what a person does, their behaviour or performance, is objectively observable. It is assumed that descriptions of the performance desired in employment may be articulated in such a way as to provide the means for assessing whether a particular person's actual performance on a specific

occasion, or over a set of occasions, matches the desired performance. Such an assumption of objectively observable performance is, however, flawed. Human behaviour defies specification in terms of objective observation; rather, it requires interpretation (Harré & Secord, 1972).

The only aspect of behaviour that is objectively observable is movement but this is not all that counts as meaningful human behaviour. When, for example, we observe a person's arm rise upwards, this may be merely a sudden twinge or a reflex action but more probably we would assume that the person has raised their arm with the intention that it be seen and taken to signify something. But what? Possibly to wave to a friend (and if so, is it 'hello' or 'goodbye'?), or to hail a taxi, or maybe to bid at an auction. Whatever interpretation is made, it should be recognised that any possible interpretation can only be made, and can only be meaningful, within social contexts. Recognition of this is central to various traditions within the social sciences, particularly symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), and social constructionism. It also forms part of the key insights in linguistic philosophy, particularly in the work of Wittgenstein (1953) and Austin (1962). Moreover, this is more than of mere academic interest; it has important practical consequences.

Drawing upon and adapting the analysis by Harré and Secord (1972), it is possible to distinguish between 'activity' and 'performance'. In the example above, the raising of the arm would be an example of an activity; the same behaviour, viewed as a bid at an auction (or hailing a taxi), would be an example of a performance. These are not two different events, but one event viewed in different ways. Activity, in the sense used here, is situated behaviour that is considered to be intentional on the part of the person concerned; performance is that activity interpreted, or construed, as having some specific meaning within the social context in which it takes place.

Two key points emerge from such a distinction. First, for any particular situated activity to be construed as performance-of-a-kind, there must be some set of social practices, appropriate to a social arena, such that the activity is taken to be an instantiation of one of them. Relating this to the skills agenda, the various skills terms used, 'communication', 'problem-solving', and so on, are attempts at expressing, in a very general manner, the practices appropriate to the kinds of occupational settings into which graduates tend to be recruited. They do not refer to some unobservable 'tool-like' entities within the graduate, used in performance, as the skills agenda seems to imply.

However, reference to the set of social practices is only part of the story. A second point is that interpretation of situated activity as performance-of-a-kind requires some judgement of whose activity is in question. For example, consider the following scenario. Suppose you go behind the scenes in a workplace you are visiting, and you notice two people engaging in some form of interaction. You hear one say to the other: 'Your work is really not up to scratch. We expect better here. Unless your work improves, the company will have to think about letting you go.'

It is probable that most people will construe the event described as the issuing of a reprimand. That is, it is an instantiation of the social practice of discipline within an employment relationship. The person speaking the words about work not being up to standard would be taken to be the manager, the other person being a subordinate employee. If, however, you are told that the positions are exactly reversed: the person speaking is, in fact, the subordinate, the one being spoken to is the manager? In this case, we are likely to interpret this as an instance of insubordination, of misconduct. The activity has not changed: same words, uttered by the same people. What has changed is who we take the persons to be. This shows that the interpretation of an activity as performance of

a particular kind requires us to have some understanding of who the actor is, of what we may call their identity.

Thus, a person's performance is not observable in objective terms. Rather, observation of performance involves an act of interpretative construction of activity as performance-of-a-kind, which depends on two conditions. First, there must be a set of social practices, appropriate to the social arena in which activity is being carried out, such that the activity is taken to be an instantiation of one of such practices. Second, there must be a set of identities or, positions, appropriate to that social arena, whereby the individual whose activity is under interpretation in the current situation is deemed to occupy one such identity.

Applying the practice–identity model of performance (Figure 1) to the issue of graduate employability, it is necessary to understand (1) what are the practices of the social arenas into which graduates typically enter, and (2) the nature of graduate identity. For graduates who have gained entry to and are viewed as working satisfactorily in graduate jobs, their work activity would be consistently interpreted as appropriate performances of the relevant practices, and they would be viewed as worthy of being regarded as a graduate. So, we need to explore both aspects to engage in appropriate forms of curriculum development and quality enhancement, concerned with the promotion of graduate employability. However, that exploration must take account of the fact that both the person whose activity is under consideration, and those who are considering such activity ('significant others'), are involved in the process of interpretation. There may be concordance between these two separate parties, or there may not be; and there may be differences of interpretation amongst the significant others.

The interpretative traditions within social science emphasise the collective production of social life, pointing out that we typically act on the basis of a 'stock of knowledge', or ready-made classificatory schema by which social meaning is attributed to particular features of what would otherwise merely be indeterminate happenings. It is this feature of the conditions of social life that the use of the term 'social practice' is intended to convey, emphasising both the patterning of meaning and the typicality of action. Of course, the main way in which meaning is conveyed, shared and patterned is through language.

The language of skills may therefore be seen as a set of generalised terms that enable communication between the jobholder and significant others. The degree of generality of the language will vary according to the extent to which the job performance requirements can be specified as activities. Jobs that are mainly routine and repetitive, regarded as low discretion and low skill, may be specified in great detail using the long-established techniques of work-study. However, graduate jobs are normally viewed as high discretion, non-routine; as such, they are difficult to specify except in very general terms; hence the generality of the vocabulary. There is, then, the problem of possible misunderstanding between the jobholder and significant others (especially the immediate line managers) about what is expected and what counts as competent performance. This may underlie the criticisms sometimes made by employers about graduates lacking certain key skills; this may index dissatisfaction arising from such misunderstanding rather than the absence of some 'tool-like' entities somewhere within graduates.

So, because it is possible to specify the practices appropriate to high-level, high-discretion occupations only in general terms, one might anticipate that issues of identity would become more significant in the interpretation of activity as performance-of-a-kind.
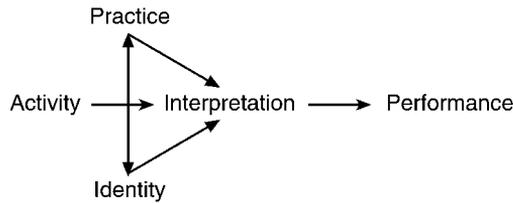
F IG. 1. Practice–identity model of the interpretation of performance.

Graduate Identity

The concept of identity has come to take a major part in recent social psychology seeking to address the nature of the social, and in sociological analysis concerned with understanding the individual actor within the structured social world (Jenkins, 1996). In such analysis, the concept of the person as a monadic entity, a sovereign self acting freely and totally rationally, is replaced by that of a social self positioned within a set of social relations and a moral order (Harré & Langenhove, 1999). They give rise to a set of explicit or implicit understandings of what should be done (morally or pragmatically) given that social positioning. Situated identities are associated with sets of practices that may be specified in varying degrees, and may change over time or between different contexts. This involves a continuing process in which the individual engages in self-identification, and significant others ascribe attributes and characteristics to the individual (social ascription). It is not the self-identification nor the social ascription that is salient but the outcome, within a particular situation, of the interaction between both. This may be considered in terms of the claim made on an identity (by the individual), and affirmation of that claim (by significant others), or their opposites, disclaim and disaffirmation (Holmes, 2000). Different modalities of emergent identity arise from the interaction between claim/disclaim by the individual, and affirmation/disaffirmation by significant others (Figure 2).

The concept of graduate identity should be understood in this interactionist sense. What is socially salient is not so much the formal award of a degree, but the extent to which an individual who has graduated is successful in gaining affirmation of their identity as a graduate in relation to the social settings for which this is deemed relevant. Taking zone 1 (indeterminate identity) as the student's start point, their aspiration would be to make a transition to the position of zone 4 (agreed identity), which is to say that they really are a graduate, both claiming to be a graduate and being accepted as such. Gaining a post, which is explicitly regarded as a graduate job, would be the obvious case; others (the recruiters) are in effect expressing the view that the individual is indeed a graduate worthy of being employed by the organisation.

However, for some this may not be a smooth transition and their position becomes that of zone 2 (failed identity). Significant others (such as graduate recruiters) are not prepared to accept them as worthy of employment as a graduate. Of course, all emergent identities are fragile, subject to potential challenge; so even the graduate positioned in zone 4 (agreed identity) may find that they are no longer viewed as worthy of being employed by the organisation, for example, where a temporary contract is not renewed or a probationary period results in non-continuation. This would place that person in zone 2, seeking affirmation of their claim on the graduate identity by gaining an appropriate job.

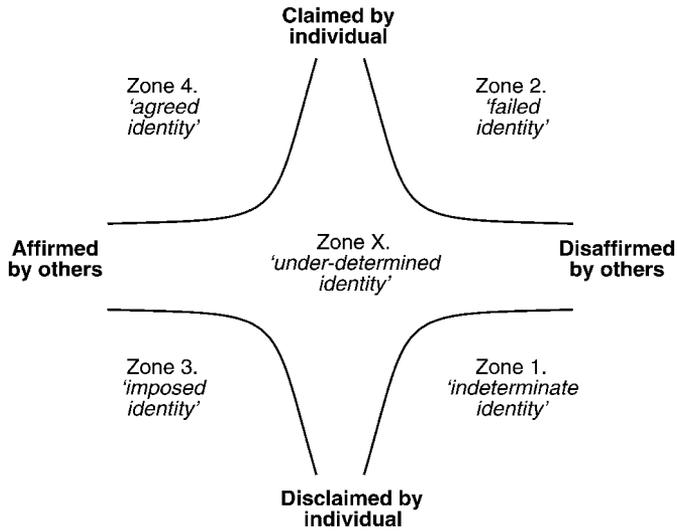An individual may only tentatively make their claim to an identity or disclaim it.

Fig. 2. Claim-affirmation model of emergent identity.

Similarly, those who are significant others in the situation may make their identity ascriptions (affirmation or disaffirmation of the claim) tentatively. Zone X in the model is intended to represent such situations, in which the individual has an under-determined identity. This is useful in considering career trajectories, whereby the experience of individuals may be considered as passages through these four zones (Holmes, 2001).

Warranting Identity

The question that now arises is how identity claims, and affirmation or disaffirmation of such claims, are made. To understand this, we may draw upon the notion of warranting, the process through which, of all the possible ways of construing a certain situation, one particular way is presented as correct. Gergen (1989) argues that this is accomplished by the parties to interaction drawing upon certain conventions of warrant. Applying this notion to emergent identity, claims and affirmations or disaffirmations, we can say that an individual will attempt to present themselves as worthy of entering the type of occupation for which being a graduate is normally deemed necessary, making such presentation on the basis of what they anticipate will be seen as legitimate grounds. In a similar manner, those who are gatekeepers to such occupations will seek to justify their decisions to allow or disallow entry, by making reference to certain legitimated grounds for such decisions.

In this sense, we may see the language of skills as a convention of warrant in respect of graduate identity (Holmes, 1999). However, it is important to repeat that the language of skills is best used as a way of alluding to practices appropriate to an occupational setting. Used in seeking employment (for example, in a job application form, or at an interview), such skills language enables the graduate to use this convention of warrant to present their claim on the graduate identity. That is why practices and identity are joined (in Figure 1) by a line with arrows at each end; the two are interlinked.

Applying the 'Graduate Identity' Approach

The 'graduate identity' approach, and the practice–identity model on which it is based, has been used as the basis for research into graduate employability, in order to frame the empirical investigation and to provide sensitising concepts for analysis of the findings (Holmes *et al.*, 1998; Holmes, 2001). However, the focus here is on the educational practices suggested by the model. It is important to state immediately that it is not claimed that the 'graduate identity' approach provides for inventions in pedagogic practices. Indeed, it is arguable that higher education is currently suffering from a surfeit of innovation: novelty is treated as all-important and intrinsically good, whilst traditional practices are viewed as outmoded and outdated. The purpose here is to suggest ways in which the 'graduate identity' approach may help provide an over-arching rationale for curriculum design, and for selection and development of teaching and assessment activities.

The key ideas concern ways of helping students to make their claims on the graduate identity. Such claims, in order to stand a reasonable chance of being successful, must be presented as an appropriate mode of warranting. So students should seek to articulate what they claim they can do in terms that relate to the practices relevant to the occupational settings they wish enter. A first-rate claim on what one can do is to make a claim on what one has done; the teaching and assessment programme should, therefore, be so designed that students have the opportunities to develop and practise, or rehearse, such claims.

Specific application within a programme of study will depend upon the nature and type of the particular programme. For vocationally-oriented degrees, there will normally be opportunities for one or more periods of work experience within the relevant occupational area. The 'graduate identity' approach would place an emphasis upon work experience as providing students with the opportunity to engage in the practices of that occupational arena in an explicit and intentional manner. Attention would be drawn by the teacher (for example, in preparation for and in reviewing of the placement) to the practices as such, rather than treating the work experience as a process of skill-acquisition in the sense of gaining possession of some entities that may be used. Attention would also be drawn to the identities within the occupational arena, particularly to those that might be associated with being a graduate, managerial positions being the most obvious. Students would be encouraged to consider what it would be like to be employable and employed in such a position, how one conducts oneself, and so on, as the basis for rehearsing their claim upon such an identity.

Where work experience is not a formal or normal part of a degree programme, but where there is still some vocational-orientation (business studies, for example), there will be opportunities for focusing upon relevant practices within the types of occupations students typically enter. These may then be translated into the various tasks that students are given within the teaching and study programme; in particular, assessment tasks may be designed to represent, in some way, the practices within the occupational area (Holmes, 1999). Such tasks should be used explicitly and intentionally in relation to the practices within the occupational arena and the positions typically occupied by graduates. For example, where students may be required to prepare a report, for example on an organisational case study, they should be required to write as if they were employed in a particular position within the organisation in the case study.

Degree courses that are not vocationally-oriented may still find ways to introduce tasks that, in some way, represent the practices appropriate to the kinds of occupational arenas into which graduates from those courses typically enter. This may require a very general

view of such practices, for which the vocabulary of the skills agenda will be useful. However, by making explicit reference to the task being representative of the kinds of practices within graduate employment, it should be possible to ensure that students view the task as rehearsal of, having a go at, an example of such a practice, rather than some process of acquiring something called a skill. Furthermore, there may be many tasks undertaken by students, as a normal part of the study programme without any reference to the employment arena, which may be re-presented as examples of practices in that arena. The very general skills terms would apply here: communication, problem-solving and so on. Without changing the current curriculum, teaching staff might still assist students to articulate their claim on their prospective graduate identity, using forms of warranting that would seem to be appropriate.

Such applications within courses and modules may be complemented by a wider range of support and provision, particularly focusing upon how students may seek to present (warrant) their claim to graduate identity, and on the trajectories of emergent identity that they might follow. This would certainly include assisting students to become fluent in the use of the vocabulary of skills and attributes, which, it seems, would help in communicating successfully to prospective employers that they are worthy of employment (Holmes, 1999). To be 'fluent', students should be practised in using a variety of such terms, with ease, when discussing the kinds of tasks they have undertaken, and how these relate to the kinds of practices they will encounter in employment. In the kind of persuasive communication that is required for presenting identity claims a degree of vagueness is in order; it involves the creation of impressions, not the presentation of forensic evidence.

How this is done will depend on the nature of the institution and the manner in which it allocates responsibility for employability between the careers advisory service and its academic, educational provision. There is no *a priori* reason for assuming that either stand-alone or embedded provision (CVCP, 1998) will be more effective. However, the 'graduate identity' approach does provide a way of relating the different provisions, educational and careers advisory, to each other in a coherent manner, within an over-arching rationale or perspective.

Conclusion

The issue of employability will be a key quality issue for many years to come, so the issues raised here clearly need more extensive consideration and discussion. This is prevented not only by limitations of space. The absence of funding for alternatives to the skills agenda, and the dominance of the skills agenda in policy discourse have, as yet, prevented the application of alternative perspectives. The hope is that the ideas and analysis presented here will provide conceptual support and ideas for application and development work that break with the skills agenda.

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