



The perils of skills: Towards a model of integrating graduate attributes into the disciplines

Tim Moore

Monash University

tim.moore@celts.monash.edu.au

Brett Hough

Monash University

brett.hough@arts.monash.edu.au

Abstract: *The notion of graduate attributes - a surprisingly enduring idea in Australian higher education over the last decade or so - has been useful as a way of requiring academics and administrators to reflect seriously on the nexus between university learning and the demands that graduates will face in their subsequent professional lives. A potential danger of this movement however, is that increasingly these attributes will be thought of as discrete skills to be developed on courses, with a concomitant downgrading of the role of disciplinary content. Manifestations of such a trend are the emergence in recent years of a variety of extra-disciplinary courses such as 'professional writing' and 'critical thinking', as well as a lingering interest in the idea of generic skills testing prior to graduation (e.g., Graduate Skills Assessment test). The main argument of this paper is that if the graduate attributes idea is to continue to be a useful one in the*

framing of university curricula, it is important that effective ways are found to integrate the development of these attributes within the context of the disciplines. We outline one such method – a possible framework for the analysis and creation of assessment tasks – which, we think, has general applicability to learning in any disciplinary setting. The key element of this framework is the notion of ‘role’ – which can be used to explore with students (and also confer on them) a range of academic and professional identities.

Key words: *graduate attributes, generic skills, assessment, assignment tasks*

Introduction

The graduate attributes idea – which conceives of university education largely in terms of the development of certain, transferable and generic skills – has continued to gather momentum in recent years. As Language and Learning professionals we find ourselves increasingly having to engage in some capacity with this initiative, principally because many of the attributes identified by universities as important relate so much to the work we do as advisers – developing students’ written and spoken communication, their capacity for critical analysis, and the like. The connection between our field and the broader graduate attributes idea is attested to in part by the fact that some of the more influential papers on the subject in the Australian literature have been produced by several of the more venerable figures in our ranks – Brigid Ballard and John Clanchy (1995) and Gordon Taylor (1990; 2000) – more of whom later.

But despite the continuing influence of the broad attributes idea, the literature suggests that it has been implemented in institutions in only very limited ways. Sumison and Goodfellow (2004) attribute this mixed record of success mainly to a failure to bring academic staff on board. They note the scepticism that many academics have for this particular episode of curriculum reform, seeing it manifestly as a “top-down”, managerially-driven agenda. Another obstacle is a perception that the ‘generic concept’ does not fit well with the diversity of knowledges and practices

found in the disciplines, or that the professional flavour of many of these putative attributes makes the idea more relevant to vocational, as opposed to higher education (Crebert, 2002).

In this paper, we argue that if the graduate attributes idea is to have any continuing validity, then it is important that effective ways are found to integrate the development of these attributes within the context of academic disciplines. We outline one such method here – a possible framework for the analysis and creation of assessment tasks – which, we think, has general applicability to learning in any disciplinary setting. In proposing such a framework, we hope to demonstrate the specific contribution language and learning professionals can make in these broader educational debates – one that draws both on the philosophical position that underpins our work, and also on the practical *in situ* experience we have assisting students to develop these capacities in relation to quite specific academic tasks.

Graduate attributes

Ballard and Clanchy's (1995) paper referred to above, locates the graduate attributes movement within a larger shift in higher education thinking and policy around the early 1990s which saw a move away from 'inputs' (efficiency and productivity) to a focus more on 'outcomes' (quality). Central to this project has been the imperative "to describe the attributes that graduates should acquire if exposed to a high quality education system - including all its processes" (Australian Higher Education Council, 1992). This emphasis on outcomes has come arguably from several sources – an increasing demand from employers for graduates to possess certain abilities, and a more general accountability pressure from the community to have the purposes of university education more clearly articulated (Hager *et al.*, 2002). Thus, in the last decade, universities have applied themselves energetically to analysing their particular teaching and learning 'processes', and to come up with an account of what it is their students will possess (or what it is hoped they will possess) at the end of their degrees.

The outcome of many of these efforts at institutions has been the compiling of lists of graduate attributes (usually consisting of up to about 10 items) intended both to

summarise extant practices, and to guide processes of curriculum development. For the purpose of illustration only, we provide the most recent list created at our institution:

1. *Effective spoken and written communication skills for proficient interpersonal and professional interactions*
2. *Enthusiasm and capacity for enquiry and research*
3. *Capacity to articulate a sound argument*
4. *Insight to identify a problem and introduce innovative solutions*
5. *Effective problem solving skills*
6. *Capacity for critical thought, analysis and synthesis*
7. *Ability to work collaboratively and to assume appropriate leadership roles*
8. *Information literacy*
9. *Socially responsible and ethical attitudes*
10. *International outlook, cultural sensitivity and inclusive approach to differences*

Not surprisingly lists like this one have been the object of a certain amount of critical scrutiny. A number of problems have been identified including the often imprecise and arbitrary nature of the categories they describe – ‘skills’, ‘capacities’, ‘values’, ‘outlooks’ etc. (Ballard and Clancy, 1995); ambiguity about whether they actually specify guaranteed outcomes, or have the status only of objectives – or even just ‘consummations devoutly to be wished’ (Oppy & Moore, 2003); and the tendency for them to look rather similar across institutions - leading some to see them as instances of the type of shallow technocratic rhetoric so disdained by social critics like Don Watson (2003).

But to recognise these problems is not to suggest a fundamental deficiency in the attributes ideas itself – the criticisms perhaps point more to certain failings at the institutional level in the way that local educational practices have been investigated and described. Ballard and Clanchy, in defending the broad idea, suggest that “a university ... really ought to be able to say with reasonable explicitness what its objectives are with respect to its students” (p. 156).

The rise of skills

Our chief concern is not with the content of the lists themselves, but with the tendency they have to emphasise - indeed increasingly to reify - the 'skills' component of university education. This is attributable in part to the increasing accountability pressures exerted on institutions by government and employer agencies, and also to the intense market pressures that faculties face in making their offerings as attractive as possible to prospective students. Inevitably, in this approach, there has been a de-emphasising of the role of disciplinary content. In Arts faculties for example, the continued existence of an area of study can no longer be justified purely on the grounds that it is of intrinsic interest - or that it should be preserved as a result of having acquired some 'heritage' status. Instead academics are required more and more to justify their disciplinary offerings in terms of the specific 'skills' they can guarantee their students will acquire - especially those that will be relevant to students' future employment. In the skills-oriented approach, content is viewed mainly as the vehicle by which these skills can be taught. In the more extreme versions, the content element of programs is seen as merely incidental.

We shall give an example of how the skills agenda has increasingly insinuated itself into thinking about academic curricula. Several years ago, the Arts faculty in which we work hired the services of an outside consultant to investigate ways in which it could make its programs more attractive to international students. In the report that followed, it was concluded that the main obstacle to recruitment was a perception across the community that Arts qualifications generally are not sufficiently vocational, and "that the financial returns that will follow from an investment in these degrees are at best uncertain". Many of the report's subsequent recommendations were aimed at dealing in some way with this perception difficulty. Central among these was a call for a 'core curriculum', to be made up of skill-based units that would have 'clear vocational relevance' - including 'Communication', 'Problem-solving', 'Critical thinking' and 'Teamwork'. The report was insistent that such subject offerings not be thought of as 'support', but be areas of study 'in their own right' designed, as it suggested, "to excite, to motivate and to inspire".

At the time, these recommendations were rejected, mainly because it was thought that insufficient market research data had been presented to justify the claim that such programs would be attractive to students. A spirited critique was also made from other quarters – from some whose interests lay beyond the pragmatic concerns of recruitment. The view expressed here was that such programs could in fact undermine the very strength of the faculty – which lay, it was held, in the content-rich nature of its core disciplines – history, literature, politics, anthropology, linguistics and so on. Indeed it was thought that the faculty’s capacity to attract students was largely contingent on it being able to make this content as ‘exciting’ and ‘inspiring’ as possible. Such a view, it must be said, is in no sense a radical one. Indeed as Langer (1992) points out, both teachers and students are naturally inclined to “think about their learning predominantly in terms of discipline knowledge, and not skill development” (p. 83-84).

But although these ‘extra-disciplinary’ skills offerings were rejected at the time of the tabling of the international student report, more recently the faculty has shown itself less vigilant in resisting the skills lure. Among its newer subject offerings are units in Professional Writing, and a Graduate Diploma course in Professional Studies – taking in communications, professional ethics, and critical thinking¹. A cursory survey of subject offerings in Arts faculties at other Australian universities suggests a similar trend towards the stand-alone skills program.

It would appear that additional impetus for such skills offerings – especially those that deal with the skills of writing and thinking *per se* – has come from a push from several quarters for a graduate skills assessment (GSA) test to be introduced as a method of measuring the acquisition of key skills. This test, commissioned by DEST, and developed by the Australian Council of Educational Research has been trialled fairly extensively over the last five years, and has been the object of intermittent enthusiasm from the current Minister for Education. With no apparent obvious rationale, the test has opted to focus on four skill areas – ‘Written communication’, ‘Critical thinking’, ‘Problem solving’ and ‘Interpersonal understandings’.

¹ With a low uptake rate, the Graduate Diploma program appears to have been short-lived.

Apart from having questionable validity - particularly the matter of how a mainly multiple choice format can properly assess the diverse skills, knowledge and techniques acquired by students on their degrees, the GSA has prompted concerns about its potential to have undue influence on university programs. As Chanock *et al.* (2004) explain:

The most serious concern is the negative effect that the test, as a quality assurance instrument, could have ultimately on the quality of university programs. If the test is mandated in the system, universities for reasons of their survival will want to ensure that their students do well on it. In such an arrangement, it is hard not to envisage valuable time being given over in already overcrowded curricula to training students in the ultimately trivial skills of test preparation (p.24).

Significantly, in the consultant's report quoted above, the GSA was seen as "creating opportunities" for Arts faculties in the teaching of dedicated skills programs.

Insights of language and learning

Despite the recent encroachments of a skills-based pedagogy, the majority position in higher education continues to hold – mercifully - to an integrated approach to the teaching of generic skills. As a recent report on the progress of introducing graduate attributes at one university puts it:

A preference for teaching graduate attributes in the context of the disciplines has been mentioned in the literature often ...but it cannot be emphasised too strongly. (Chapman, 2004: p. 23)

Such statements resonate strongly with the type of conceptions that language and learning professionals have developed about such matters in the relatively short history of our field. As a group intensely engaged with issues of language, skills, content, and contexts - in the work we do with our students - we are perhaps as well placed as any to understand the relationships that inhere between these different entities, including the impossibility of imagining the acquisition of skills (or attributes) occurring in any meaningful way separate from content. Indeed, Ballard and Clanchy's (1995) assertion - that "such skills cannot be learned *in vacuo*" – might be regarded as the closest thing we have to a core belief in the field. Such a notion is rooted in the phenomenological axiom – first advanced by Brentano a century ago –

that “thinking is always of necessity thinking about something” (cited in Gardner, 1985), a formula that applies to all of the core activities that our students are engaged in – writing, reading, researching.

Perhaps the thinker in our field who has done more than anyone else to articulate a theoretical relationship between notions of skill and content in our work is Gordon Taylor. In his paper ‘The notion of skill – a hermeneutic perspective’, Taylor (1990) draws on Aristotle to elaborate on two well-understood types of ‘knowing’ – ‘the ‘knowing that’ (*episteme*), which in the university context refers to disciplinary content, and the ‘knowing how’ (*techne*), which equates with what are nowadays called generic skills. Taylor suggests it is now accepted in most serious traditions of the study of learning – like cognitive science or phenomenography – that these two types of knowing are of their nature inextricably related. There is broad agreement, he insists, that “there are no generalised transferable skills of any consequence which exist (or can be taught) independent of content” (p. 8).

But this is not the sum of it, Taylor suggests. Any account of learning that takes in only *episteme* and *techne* – and which sees learning and scholarship simply as the unproblematic application of generic techniques to particular bodies of knowledge – is for Taylor a seriously limited one. Significantly in Aristotle’s schema, Taylor explains, there is a further category – *phronesis* – which translates variously as ‘practical knowledge’, ‘moral knowledge’ or simply ‘understanding’. *Phronesis* brings in an additional dimension of ‘knowing’ – a kind of executive knowledge (or a “knowing what to do”) that comes into play in the quite specific situations in which we find ourselves. As Taylor explains, *phronesis* is concerned with:

doing what is best in the circumstances – on dealing with content and context of immediate and highly variable practical situations which demand action from us (1990: 4).

It is the ‘content and context’ of practical situations that create the variability – and indeed the great potential for creativity – in the different forms of academic engagement required of students. On this issue, Taylor points to an understanding that we as language and learning professional all have, but often our students lack - that the so-called generic academic skills, like essay writing, or being able to think

critically, will often assume very different guises in specific learning contexts – whether these be related to level of study, or discipline area, or even specific academic tasks. It is helping students towards this practical understanding (*phronesis*) – a mediating of the generality of skills (*techne*) and the particularities of disciplinary knowledge (*episteme*) - that Taylor believes should be the principal concern of a higher education.

In a later paper, Taylor (2000) relates these understandings to the special place he sees language and learning professionals occupying in the academy. Although in many respects our positions in institutions are marginal – administratively, professionally, even geographically, Taylor thinks we need to see ourselves as integrally engaged in the mediating of these two broad domains – that is the development of students’ abilities in relation to the quite specific tasks and contents that they bring to us for advice. Taylor sees our role – perhaps somewhat grandly - thus:

It is my view that the most important function of the language and learning professional in the university is to be a catalyst for reconciling the top-down (deductive) beloved of administrators, and the bottom-up (inductive) which lies at the heart of teaching in the disciplines (Taylor, 2000; p.160).

We have to acknowledge that our limited status within universities often prevents us from fully assuming the type of ‘catalysing’ role envisaged by Taylor here. However our *in situ* work with students certainly enables us to recognise that there is an amount of ‘reconciling’ work that needs to be done.

Attributes and assessment

This gap between the ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ – that Taylor speaks of - is particularly apparent, we think, when one tries to ‘reconcile’ notional lists of graduate attributes, with the realities of student work in the faculties, especially the work they need to complete as assessment requirements on their courses. To take the example again of our own institution, whilst the graduate attributes outlined earlier suggest a broad and diverse range of abilities – ones as relevant to the workplace and community, as to the academy (eg. *the ability to introduce innovative solutions; to work collaboratively, to be socially responsible* etc), our experience is that

assessment practices continue to be oriented towards the development of quite specific discipline-related skills. This observation is borne out in research one of us was involved in several years ago that looked at assessment practices across a range of courses at two universities (Moore & Morton, 2005). In a corpus of approximately 150 tasks collected from both undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs, it was found that about 80% of writing assessment prescribed distinctly academic genres (*literature reviews, research proposals*), and of these more than 60% prescribed the traditional academic essay. Whilst one certainly does not want to dismiss the value of these discursive forms – nor indeed to entertain the possibility of any ‘dumbing down’ of assessment requirements – there is a need to consider how assessment regimes like this might relate to (and be ‘reconciled with’) the broader attributes agenda. On this point, Chanock (2003) notes that traditional academic genres are well-attuned to making students aware of the ‘complexities’ of issues, but that such an outlook may not necessarily be valued in some of the workplaces our students enter – where rhetorical activity is often oriented towards “swift decision-making and action”.

A benefit of our *in situ* work - and our permanent access to the ‘bottom-up’, as it were - is that every so often we come across quite innovative assessment tasks, ones that require students to engage with academic knowledge in interesting, and distinctly non-academic ways. The following from a Women’s Studies subject is a good example.

In April this year, the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, launched a report ‘Valuing Parenthood’, on options for paid maternity leave that is available on-line. (Hint: You can locate their link to this report on the unit portal page). On that same site, there is a request for the public to submit responses to the report. Reflecting on your readings this semester on topics such as equality versus difference, heterosexuality, and gender in the workplace, draft a response to the issue and options raised in the report. Work with a partner.

The interest of this task is not just its prescribing of a non-traditional written genre – a ‘submission’. We can see that there is additional variability here, both in the role that the student must assume - not so much a student identity here, but more that of

interested citizen - and also in the intended audience for the text - not an academic, but a public governmental one.

In putting together a response to a task like this, there would appear to be challenges for the student beyond the usual ones of composing a coherent and well-researched piece of academic writing. We can see that the shift in audience means that students will have to be judicious about the way they make use of extant knowledge – their ‘semester’s readings’. For example, will they need to make explicit reference to theoretical materials, or should they make their pitch at a more practical level? Even the normally straightforward matter of citation is potentially problematic here. How much will they need to cite these readings? And indeed in their writing, would it be more strategic to project an identity of academic authority, or rather to present as an informed citizen only. In short, the student has to exercise a good deal of judgment about how they will apply disciplinary knowledge to a new and possibly unfamiliar context. We are reminded here of Taylor’s account of *phronesis* quoted above: “doing what is best in the circumstances – on dealing with content and context of immediate and highly variable practical situations which demand action from us” (1990: 4).

Authentic tasks like this one from the Women’s Studies subject are particularly interesting for the way that they provide a context for the enacting of many of the abilities typically found in graduate attribute inventories – as well as managing to do this without being too self-conscious and pre-determined about the process. In relation to the attributes in the list referred to above, we can see that the task takes in at least some of the following:

- *Capacity for critical thought, analysis and synthesis*– in evaluating the draft report, based on one’s readings
- *Effective communication skills*– in preparing a written submission
- *Capacity to articulate a sound argument* – in commenting on options canvassed in the report
- *Information literacy* – in accessing the report online

- *Socially responsible and ethical attitudes* – in being engaged in an issue of clear social importance
- *Ability to work collaboratively* – in the co-authoring of the submission

Tasks like this seem to us particularly useful. The impression one gets however, is that they are usually set for students on a somewhat *ad hoc* basis – and are motivated mainly by the need to provide ‘novelty’ in assessment practices. The writer of the women’s studies assignment, for example, mentioned that she created the task mainly to give students “a bit of a break from the usual run of essays in the subject” (and also interestingly to find formats that would be “plagiarism-proof”, as she described it). It seems to us however, that there is the opportunity to subject tasks like this to some systematic analysis, and also to explore ways in which they might be effectively utilised within the graduate attributes framework.

A model of assessment tasks

It is our view that the assessment task is as good a construct as any to use as the focus for the development of graduate attributes. This is for the reason outlined by Crookes (1986) that “much if not most of human activity, whether in employment or in education can be seen as a series of tasks – most, although not all, having some communicative aspect to them”. In Figure 1, we outline a possible schema for thinking about variety in assessment tasks in a particular discipline area. The example used is history, but the same analysis can be

Figure 1: Possible analytical schema for assessment tasks - using history as example

AUTHORSHIP	ROLE	GENRE	MODE	DISCIPLINE	AUDIENCE
Individual	student	essay	writer	in history	writing for lecturer
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
	<u>Academic</u> -historian	-research proposal -grant application -research project -refereed article -conference abstract/paper			discipline
collaborative	<u>Professional</u> -journalist -teacher -textbook writer -biographer -museum curator -activist -editor -script writer	-reportage -lesson -textbook -biography -exhibition program -debate/press release -publication -film script	speaker		general public students specific client group
	<u>Other</u> eg. historical actor (politician, public figure etc.)	-speech -document			historical audience

conducted, we believe, for any discipline area². At the top level of the figure we have sought to characterise what continues to be the ‘archetypal task configuration’ in many discipline areas – ‘the individual student essay writer in discipline X writing for the lecturer’. From this, we have generated a number of analytical categories – *authorship* (ie. individual vs. collaborative); *role* (a range of academic, professional and other identities); *genre* (a range of possible ‘communicative events’ associated with these identities); *mode* (written vs. spoken); *audience* (academic, professional, public etc.). The only category that is invariable in our schema is that of discipline. This relates to our belief, stated earlier, in the centrality of ‘content knowledge’– and the importance of being able to adapt this knowledge for a range of socio-rhetorical purposes and contexts.

The schema has clearly been influenced by theoretical work done in the fields of rhetoric and genre studies (eg. Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990). But where much of this work takes as its starting point the notion of ‘discourse community’, from which a range of communicative purposes and genres can be derived (Swales, 1990), we approach the identification of genres from the perspective of the student, and the range of possible ‘roles’ that may be relevant to them in their present and future lives. The list of roles provided in the table, which includes *journalist*, *teacher*, *curator* etc. is a notional one only, but one that could be validated without too much difficulty through reference to graduate destination surveys, or simply finding out from students what their interests and prospects might be. It is important to stress too that all the ‘roles’, ‘genres’ etc. considered need not be exclusively ‘functional’ ones (professional and academic), but can take in more ‘poetic’ and ‘expressive’ forms (Britton, 1970) including for example, the preparing of film scripts, or the creating of imaginary historical documents.

The rationale for such a clearly discursively-based organisation of assessment comes from observations frequently made nowadays about the overwhelmingly linguistic and semiotic nature of contemporary work. For Jean Baudrillard (1980), this is one of the defining characteristics of the condition of postmodernity – a shift, as he explains, from a former ‘age of production’ – based on industry labour and

² The table was developed for a professional development session on ‘Assessment and graduate attributes’ run for staff in the School of Historical Studies.

accumulation, to one of 'simulation' – based on media, computerisation, and information processing. Norman Fairclough (2002) makes a similar observation. There is a sense, he suggests:

in which language (and more broadly semiosis) is becoming more central in the New Capitalism than in earlier forms of capitalism ...implied for instance in descriptions of the New Capitalism as 'knowledge-' or 'information- based' (p. 163).

Applications and caveats

In setting out this range of possible 'roles', 'genres' etc in the model, the suggestion is certainly not that an academic program would seek to provide instruction in how each might be successfully enacted by students. Indeed this would amount to just another type of skills learning. The aim instead would be to draw on a select number of task types, as a basis for exploring the variable ways in which written and spoken knowledge needs to be shaped and adapted to circumstances, as well as a consideration of the different discursive processes and forces that will have a bearing on this shaping. Drawing on the history samples, students might be asked to reflect, for example, on how the same field knowledge (eg. aspects of the Vietnam War – a popular history subject in our faculty) would be realised differently as an essay, as a textbook extract, or as a sequence from a documentary.

Such an exploration need not be a technical one. It would be inappropriate, for example, to impose on students any theoretical account of text-context relations – for example, the systemic functional linguistic constructs of 'field', 'tenor' and 'mode'. Instead one would want to rely on a more organic view of context and circumstance - perhaps of the type suggested by Charles Bazerman. Bazerman (1988) suggests four different contexts – the object under study, the relevant literature, the anticipated audience, and the author's own self – which can be used as a basis for understanding knowledge-making processes, as well as to recognise how variable textualisations often constitute 'different moves in quite different games' (p. 46).

Central to the model we have proposed is the idea of students being called on to assume a variety of roles – academic, professional and others. It has to be

acknowledged however, that as a pedagogical method, the notion of role–conferral and task simulation in the classroom is not without its problems. Freedman, Adam and Smart (1994) note the lack of ‘exigency’ (Miller, 1984) in the classroom simulation – that is, the absence of specific social purposes, motives, interests and investments that typically inhere authentic communicative situations – which both give them their substance, and shape the way they will proceed. As Bourdieu and Passeron have noted on this point – “it is [principally] the speaker’s anticipation of the reception which his/her discourse will receive (its price) which contributes to *what* is said and *how*” (p. 154). Thus, when these roles - both producer (speaker/writer) and receiver (audience) - are not real, but only simulated, it is difficult for students to have a genuine grasp of what the consequences of their rhetorical actions might be, and thus the choices they need to make will seem less compelling.

It has also been noted that the learning contexts in universities and workplaces are also different. Freedman and Adam (1996) note for example, that the processes of knowledge production that go on at university are best understood as a form of ‘facilitated performance’ – wherein the activity is undertaken primarily for the learner - and where performance is assessed mainly in terms of the achievement of certain learning objectives. This contrasts with the workplace, where there is little deliberate facilitation of individual abilities, and where attention is directed almost entirely to “the task at hand and its successful completion” (p.410). Performance in the workplace context thus is gauged ultimately in relation to the achievement of organisational goals. On this point, Freedman and Adam (1996) suggest that the transition from university to work involves not only learning new genres of discourse, but also learning new ways of learning these genres (p.42)³.

Clearly there are important differences between university and workplace contexts, and between student and graduate/worker identities, and these point to certain limitations in the approach we have outlined. What needs to be stressed however, is that the objective of this type of program is not towards the successful enactment of particular roles as they relate to certain prescribed socio-rhetorical situations.

³ The important issue of disparities between university and professionals discourses is an issue taken up in additional papers at this conference by Jan Pinder and Steve Price.

Instead, we see the aim more modestly – to help students recognise that they will need to take on a variety of personae and social roles in their future lives, and help them to understand in some basic way how these roles will have a bearing on the approaches and practices they adopt.

Conclusion

Ronald Barnett, in a recent and evocatively titled article ‘Learning for an unknown future’ stresses, after Baumann (2000), the ‘fluidity’ and ‘fragility’ of contemporary life, which demands he says new pedagogical responses. In a world that has become ‘radically unknowable’, Barnett suggests “knowledge and skills can no longer provide a platform for going on with any self-assuredness”. What is needed he suggests is a focus on ontological qualities – an instilling of the qualities of ‘confidence’ and ‘self-belief’ that will enable our students to go forth into a challenging world” (p.254). Such ideas recapitulate our earlier discussion of Taylor’s work (1990) and the priority he thinks should be given to Aristotle’s *phronesis*, over other forms - *episteme* and *techne*.

Elsewhere Taylor (2000) describes the desired quality as simply one of judgement: “What students stand most in need of”, he suggests, “is help to develop ... the faculty of judgement ... It is only judgement that truly enables people to make appropriate use of the knowledge and skills they have built up in the many different situations” of their learning. (p. 162). Taylor goes on to point out that such a faculty, like Barnett’s ontological qualities, cannot be taught in any systematic way. But what we can do, he explains:

is to create the conditions under which judgment in our students is given a chance to flower, to chance their arm or pen. ...What their education needs to put before them is as wide a variety of experiences, situations, circumstances, language games as possible (p.162).

The suggestions outlined in this paper may be one modest way to provide this variety of experience.

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