CHAPTER 13

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CONSTRUCTING PROFESSIONALS’ EMPLOYABILITIES: CONDITIONS FOR ACCOMPLISHMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

It can be argued that currently established discourses of employability – most particularly the competence movement’s appropriation of employability in which employability skills are narrowly defined as functional skills – are better at describing the *outcomes* of change(s) in graduate attributes than at analysing the
processes behind them. Experiential learning is one such process. The deliberate
design of learning and teaching strategies is another.

Employability is a complex concept that has both formal and non-formal
dimensions. Employability skills are commonly put together as skills frameworks
or skills schemes for national industry or professional bodies and, as such, they are
formal descriptions of skill.
Consider this example from an Australian federal government-sponsored Report:

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

What are these personal attributes?

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

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

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