

The discursive construction of the 'competent' learner-worker: from Key Competencies to 'employability skills'¹

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The subjectivity of workers, articulated in terms of the personal attributes required in ongoing conditions of economic change, has been at the forefront of current discussions of generic skills in Australia. This article explores the discursive construction and reconstruction of the 'competent' learner-worker from its initial elaboration in the Mayer Committee's 1992 report on Key Competencies to its re-specification in contemporary reports concerned with developing a new framework of 'employability skills'. I argue that various theories of subjectivity necessarily (if implicitly) mobilized in any consideration of the personal attributes of learner-workers generate confusion around their learnability. I suggest that a nature/nurture dichotomy haunts past and present discussions about the personal attributes of learner-workers and that this will likely create stumbling blocks as policy makers and educators attempt to codify personal attributes for the purposes of including them in training programs. Apart from its conceptual problematics and incongruities, the whole project of specifying the desired personal attributes of learner-workers and making these available for assessment against competency standards is necessarily a normalizing exercise. As such, the project will be subject to refusal, resistance, contestation, or appropriation in various ways by educators, trainers and worker-learners alike.

Introduction

A renewed concern with workers' subjectivity has been at the centre of three recent review reports² of the Australian Key Competencies framework initially formulated by the Mayer Committee in 1992. Citing research identifying employers' changing requirements of workers in a context of continuing rapid change in the economy and workplace, the difficulties encountered in implementing the Key Competencies, and confusion over what the Key Competencies should be, the authors of these reports argue for adopting an expanded set of generic skills which would include personal attributes, attitudes and values, against the Mayer Committee's recommendations to the contrary.

There is nothing new in the idea that conceptions of work skills and even the desired personal qualities of workers change historically in relation to the emerging

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requirements of industry and the economy.³ Organizational changes, particularly flattened management structures, mean that workers today are expected to be more self-directive and take on greater responsibility for planning, executing and improving their work. Further, today's workers are expected to take responsibility for and manage their own learning and development over the course of their working lives. Put simply, the 'new economy' demands new kinds of people with new knowledge, skills and dispositions even (or perhaps most particularly) at the 'low'-level end of the job skills spectrum. Accordingly, educational outcomes in the vocational education sector are increasingly focused on the characteristics, subjectivity and dispositions of the individual such that "'changing selves" seems to be an aim of contemporary education and training' (Chappell *et al.*, 2003, p. 2).

This article is concerned firstly with identifying the new forms of subjectivity required of the contemporary learner-worker as these are articulated in discourses of generic skills. It tracks the discursive construction and reconstruction of the 'competent' learner-worker from its initial elaboration in the Finn and Mayer Committees' reports through to its re-specification in current discourses of 'generic' or 'employability' skills articulated in the three review reports that will be the focus of discussion here. Given the contemporary education and training system's apparent focus on changing the working self, the construction of the competent learner-worker through these various discourses of generic skills is taken here to constitute a normative-regulatory ideal which educators seek to 'realize' or 'instantiate' (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 183) in individuals through pedagogical technologies.

Secondly, the article examines the assumptions about human subjectivity which are necessarily mobilized, even if implicitly, in any consideration of the personal attributes or qualities of the learner-worker. Here I am particularly interested in how the three review reports address and overcome the Mayer Committee's objection to including personal attitudes and values in a competency or skills framework on the grounds that 'a set of Key Competencies can only contain those things which can be developed by education and training, which do not require some innate predisposition or adherence to a particular set of values and which are amenable to credible assessment' (Mayer Committee, 1992, p. 5). As I attempt to show in this discussion, the Mayer Committee's deployment of a nature/nurture dualism, which discursively constructs separate domains of 'innate predispositions' and 'learnable competencies', haunts subsequent attempts to include personal attributes in a new framework of generic or employability skills. How the tension between the learnable and the innate is played out in and between the three review reports is one of the main concerns of this paper, as is the changing conceptions of 'skill' through which personal attributes are accommodated in the proposed new frameworks of generic or employability skills.

The analysis offered here focuses on the fictive figure of the competent learner-worker as it is constructed in discourses of generic skills. Questions of how this normative-regulatory ideal of the competent learner-worker is taken up and implemented by teachers and learners in specific pedagogical contexts are beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I am more concerned here with the 'programmatic

ambitions' (Meredyth, 1998, p. 23) of discourses of generic skills, their understanding of the role of educators and educational programs, and with identifying some of the problematics produced through the reconfiguration of 'personal attributes' as a generic skill. From a symptomatic reading of discussions on teaching, learning and assessment in the three review reports and related reports, I suggest that slippages between conceptions of the desired qualities of contemporary learner-workers as learnt or innate are likely to produce stumbling blocks as personal attributes are coded and implemented in competency-based training programs. I conclude, however, not with recommendations for conceptual or classificatory clarification with a view to resolving the problems I identify but rather with the observation that the exercise of normalizing power inherent in the project of producing the 'competent' learner-worker will always be vulnerable to contestation and resistance.

Key competencies

In the 1980s and 1990s, Australia, along with similar advanced economies such as Britain and the United States, embarked on a series of industrial and educational reforms designed to improve their competitiveness in a globalizing world economy. The reorganization of the Australian vocational education and training (VET) system was part of an interrelated set of federal government policy initiatives whose purpose was to secure a more highly skilled and productive workforce in the face of rapid industrial and technological change. Reforms to VET in Australia involved the introduction of a unified national credentialing system and competency-based training (CBT), the development and endorsement of national competency standards, national accreditation and assessment frameworks and, later, the development of industry training packages. Importantly, the reformed VET system in Australia would be 'industry led', that is, more closely aligned with industry and employer needs.

At the same time, the development of a set of generic 'key' skills was increasingly seen as essential to workers' effective participation in the emerging patterns of work. The new 'adaptable and flexible' worker was said to need, in addition to specific skills, a set of generic skills transferable across changing work sites and different occupations. The task of formulating a set of Key Competencies for the Australian workforce drew on similar developments in comparative economies throughout the 1980s, particularly in Britain and the United States. The British Manpower Services Commission and the American Society for Training and Development and Department of Labor (ASTD/DOL) had both developed a set of key or core skills required by employers in the new economic environment. Over the same period the OECD was also concerned with identifying the new skills required of contemporary workers. These efforts culminated in the establishment of its four-year Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) project in 1998.

In Australia, the desired generic skills, or 'Key Competencies', were initially elaborated in two major reports, the Finn Committee's report, *Young people's participation in post-compulsory education and training* (1991) and the Mayer Committee's report, *Putting general education to work: the Key Competencies report* (1992). One of the Key Competency areas put forward by the Finn Committee was 'Personal and Interpersonal Characteristics'. These characteristics consisted of personal management and planning including career planning, negotiating and team skills, initiative and leadership, adaptability to change, self-esteem and ethics (Finn Committee, 1991, p. 58). Having defined the Key Competency areas, the Finn Committee recommended that the next step should be the development of a standards framework for each of the Key Competencies with a 'profile' which described clearly the nature of each competency at a range of levels. This would allow educators in different education and training sectors to focus on the desired outcomes and develop appropriate curriculum and teaching approaches. The profile would also allow a consistent approach to the assessment of and reporting on the Key Competencies. However, the Finn Committee itself had little to say about what this might look like in practice or how the desired personal and interpersonal competencies could be codified for curriculum and assessment purposes. Indeed, the Committee noted the potential difficulty in assessing the competency of 'self-esteem', for example, through a national reporting framework. Instead, the Committee proposed devolving responsibility for assessment of Personal and Interpersonal Characteristics to institutions. Here, it was imagined that each individual learner could be assessed for the required personal and interpersonal competencies through both 'objective' and 'subjective' methods, for example, through individual references or reports (Finn Committee, 1991, pp. 68–70).

The incipient difficulties of assessing personal and interpersonal competencies re-emerged in the Mayer Committee's reconsideration of the Finn Committee's areas of Key Competency. The Mayer Committee was established to undertake further development of the Key Competencies identified by the Finn Committee and to 'develop a means of describing them that will provide a common reference point for curriculum and teaching ... and provide the basis for a consistent approach to assessing and reporting achievement' (Mayer Committee, 1992, p. vii). In determining what the Key Competencies should be, the Mayer Committee called for submissions, consulted key stakeholders and, as previously noted, considered policy developments overseas.⁴ However, against recommendations for inclusion of personal attitudes and values put by industry and community groups alike, the Mayer Committee essentially followed the British skills model and excluded 'attitudes and values' from its definition of the Key Competencies. While the Committee stated that it acknowledged and shared a commitment to the importance of punctuality, initiative and honesty,

it [however] maintains the view that a set of Key Competencies can only contain those things which can be developed by education and training, which do not require some innate predisposition or adherence to a particular set of values and which are amenable to creditable assessment. On these tests and, in some cases, the test of conceptual

coherence, the Committee considers that attitudes and values fall outside the field of the Key Competencies. (Mayer Committee, 1992, p. 13)

At the same time, however, the Committee anticipated that the desirable ethics and attitudes would 'develop naturally' in the course of developing the Key Competencies in work settings, for instance, through 'working with others and in teams'.⁵

What is interesting in this brief review of the Finn and Mayer reports is that the Finn Committee took 'personal and interpersonal characteristics' to be one of the Key Competency areas while the Mayer Committee took 'personal attitudes and values' to be to some degree a matter of innate predisposition which, on that Committee's definition of a Key Competency, precluded their inclusion. The tension between these different conceptions of personal characteristics and attributes, and whether they should be categorized as a skill, competence or neither, continues to be played out in contemporary discussions of generic 'employability' skills. This tension is registered in Curtis and McKenzie's (2001, p. 4) call for a clarification of terms and concepts, noting that while the terms 'skills', 'competencies', 'qualities' and 'attributes' are often used interchangeably in current discussions, they may not refer to the same concept at all. In the next section I explore these questions further as they relate to the three review reports.

Employability skills

The question of the personal attributes of workers returned in discussions of generic skills some 10 years after the Mayer Committee's deliberations. In a context of ongoing economic and workplace changes, emerging new industries and other developments,⁶ the question of what constituted a 'competent' worker was revisited. A new impetus to develop a nationally agreed upon set of key employment competencies saw three commissioned reports appear in quick succession: Peter Kearns' *Review of research: generic skills for the new economy* (Kearns, 2001), David Curtis and Phillip McKenzie's *Employability skills for Australian industry: literature review and framework development* (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001), and ACCI/BCA's *Employability skills for the future* (ACCI/BCA, 2002). Each of the three reports reviewed the Mayer Committee's Key Competencies in light of difficulties encountered in their implementation and a lack of consensus on what the competencies should be in the context of continuing rapid change in the economy and workplace. After reviewing the literature, examining overseas developments⁷ and consulting with industry bodies, all three reports offered a revised set or 'framework' of generic or 'employability' skills for consideration. Notably, although the Curtis and McKenzie report was produced as part of the process of developing the ACCI/BCA report, the recommended skills framework varies markedly between the two on whether particular 'personal attributes' are understood as 'skills' or as non-skill-based 'behaviours'. Each of the three reports also considered to a greater or lesser extent the various implications of these frameworks for VET and higher education in terms of curriculum development, teaching and learning, assessment and reporting.

What is most striking across the three review reports is the consensus that 'personal attributes' need now to be included in any reformulation of the Key Competencies. Just as the 'skilled' worker of the pre-reform era was problematized in the process of discursively constructing the 'competent' worker,⁸ so too is the 'competent' worker, as constructed by the Mayer Committee, problematized in the process of its re-specification in the three review reports. The general claim is that, in the current context, the Mayer Committee's Key Competencies are too limited. Ongoing challenges posed by the exponential pace of change and increased competition, the emergence of the new knowledge-based economy and information society, and of the 'high-performance' workplace require a new focus on the accumulation of human capital and hence the attributes of workers. Given this imperative, and cognizant of past difficulties, Curtis and McKenzie (2001, p. 41) nevertheless believe that in the present context 'although the challenges in conceptualizing and implementing the soft skills are formidable, the effort would seem warranted'.

I now want to turn to each of the proposed skills frameworks presented in the three reports, focusing on how the desired personal attributes of the contemporary worker are categorized—as a skill, competence or neither—and whether or not these attributes are understood as learnable. The ACCI/BCA's Employability Skills Framework explicitly separates out 'Skills/Competencies' from 'personal attributes'. 'Skills' are defined as the learned capacity of the individual while 'personal attributes' are defined as 'non-skills based behaviours and attitudes' which workers are nevertheless expected to acquire (ACCI/BCA, 2002, pp. 5, 13). The personal attributes listed are: 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 and adaptability (ACCI/BCA, 2002, p. 8). 'Self-management' appears on the list of 'Skills', as does 'Initiative and Enterprise', under which heading also appears 'adapting to new situations'. Confusingly, then, in this skills framework at least, 'adaptability' is figured both as a non-skill-based behaviour or attitude, and as a learned skill.

Curtis and McKenzie's proposed framework contains three categories of employability skill: Basic Skills, Intellectual Abilities and Personal Attributes. The category 'Personal Attributes' is defined as 'attitudes and abilities that enable individuals to monitor and manage their own learning needs, to contribute to and monitor their own work, and to collaborate with others in high performance work teams' (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001, p. 54). The 'Personal Attributes' category is broken down into three subcategories: Continuous learning, Personal attributes (yes, 'personal attributes' is a subcategory of 'personal attributes') and Interpersonal skills. The subcategory of 'Personal attributes' lists: 'Has positive self-esteem; Understands that own actions influence others; Is self-manager, resourceful, shows initiative and effort; Displays sense of ethics including integrity and honesty; Accepts responsibility for own actions; Seeks and accepts feedback' (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001, p. 51). For

Curtis and McKenzie, while personal attributes are 'skills', albeit 'soft' skills, there is no explicit reference to their learnability.

Given that Curtis and McKenzie's report was part of the process of developing the ACCI/BCA's report, the different categorizations of personal attributes is curious. These different categorizations create inconsistencies across the two reports. For example the 'personal attributes' of 'honesty and integrity', and 'self-esteem' are common to both Curtis and McKenzie's and the ACCI/BCA's frameworks, yet in Curtis and McKenzie's framework they are classified as a skill, while in the ACCI/BCA framework they are classified as non-skill-based behaviours and attitudes.

Kearns (2001, pp. 51–52), rather than listing the desired personal attributes, provides a more complex mapping of overlapping clusters of key 'generic skills', as he terms them. Drawing on a 'holistic' approach and the OECD's DeSeCo project, Kearns constructs two alternative mappings, both with four clusters of skills—Work readiness and work habits; Enterprise, innovation and creativity skills; Learning, thinking and adaptability skills; Interpersonal skills. The second mapping adds a fifth 'metacompetence', 'Autonomy, Personal Mastery, Self-direction', signifying, by its definition as a metacompetence and its central location on the map in relation to the other clusters of generic skills, a co-ordination or overseer function.⁹ On both mappings, 'emotional intelligence and self understanding'¹⁰ and 'willingness to learn, positive attitude to change and complexity and mastery of mental models' appear as underpinning 'personal attributes' to the 'Interpersonal skills' and 'Learning, thinking and adaptability' skills clusters, respectively.

From this mapping it seems that Kearns takes personal attributes to be separate from generic skills, though underpinning them. The separation of 'skill' and 'personal attributes' is confirmed in the Glossary, where they appear as separate entries. 'Personal attributes' is defined as follows: 'These include attributes such as individual responsibility and self-direction, confidence, self-esteem, sociability, and integrity which enable people to be autonomous, responsible members of work teams, and adaptive in changing conditions' (Kearns, 2001, p. 84). 'Skill', on the other hand, is defined as '[a]n acquired aptitude; an ability to perform complex motor and/or cognitive acts with ease, precision, and adaptability to changing conditions' (Kearns, 2001, p. 84, citing Wienert's expert opinion for the DeSeCo project). Without any further elaboration on these definitions, Kearns could be read here as subscribing to the view of personal attributes as innate possessions of the self.

The DeSeCo project, on which Kearns' definitions are based, also separates attributes from skills, classifying attributes as a 'competence'. In their definition, 'skills' and 'competencies' are not synonyms: 'Skills is used to designate an ability to perform complex motor and/or cognitive acts with ease, precision, and adaptability to changing conditions, while the term competence designates a complex action system encompassing cognitive skills, attitudes and other non-cognitive components' (OECD, 2002, p. 7, footnote 3). In the DeSeCo project's view, the 'self-authoring function' along with other competencies (i.e. abilities, capacities and dispositions) are taken to be 'embedded' in the internal cognitive mental structures of individuals and are therefore, presumably, to a greater or lesser extent innate. However, in a

discussion paper on the DeSeCo project's expert opinion papers, the authors (the key figures in the project and co-authors of the executive summary) explicitly reject the idea that competencies are innate, inborn characteristics and instead assert that 'competencies are learned' (Rychen & Hersh Salganik, 2000, pp. 73–74).

Apart from notable differences between the proposed skills frameworks in their classification of personal attributes generally, or certain attributes in particular, a few other observations can be made. Firstly, there are some incongruous elements, particularly in Kearns' deployment of ideas of personal 'autonomy' within a regime of national competency standards. The attempt at normalizing the working self, inherent in the idea of somehow instilling or developing in workers the desired personal attributes and assessing them against competency standards, would seem to cut across the idea of a 'self-authoring' function, as defined by the DeSeCo project, which informs Kearns' notions of 'autonomy' and 'personal mastery'. 'Acting autonomously' constitutes one of three Key Competencies proposed by the DeSeCo project and is defined as the 'ability to defend and assert one's rights, interests, responsibilities, limits and needs ... the ability to form and conduct life plans and personal projects ... the ability to act within the big picture/the larger context' (OECD, 2002, pp. 12–13). Acting autonomously rests on the 'self-authoring' function which allows individuals to

step back from the many expectations and claims of their environment, think for themselves, act against the backdrop of a complex, interdependent and conflict-prone environment, take control over their actions based on their own feelings, thoughts, values, act rather than be acted upon, and author their own life rather than play out the scripts of others. (OECD, 2002, p. 11)

These definitions of 'acting autonomously' and the 'self-authoring' function not only sit in some tension with the idea of assessment against competency standards but also seemingly contradict the DeSeCo's project's own explicitly normative, external, socially determined 'demand-driven' and 'demand-oriented' approach to competence (OECD, 2002, pp. 8–9, 11). However, apparently cognizant of these inconsistencies, Rychen and Hersh Salganik's (2000, p. 76) discussion of the DeSeCo expert opinions attempts a resolution through arguing that 'the fact that people live by internalized social norms and in the context of relationships to others is not incompatible with autonomy [because] scrutinizing and reflecting on these norms and relationships is part of individual growth and the maturation of identity'. Whether or not this argument resolves the issue satisfactorily, I nevertheless suspect that the positioning of 'autonomy' within a normative regime of competency standards and assessment will likely confound educators' attempts to implement such concepts in training programs.

The desired personal attributes themselves can be in some tension with each other. For instance, according to the ACCI/BCA skills framework, workers are expected to be loyal and committed at the same time as being adaptable and flexible. In the new work order where 'flexibility' of labour arrangements most often translates into a deregulated labour market, more and more workers are finding themselves

employed on a casual, contracted, labour hire or outsourced basis (Buchanan *et al.*, 2001, pp. 16–17). It seems that workers are being expected to invest more of themselves in a workplace in which they may only be peripherally and tenuously attached to an employer, while at the same time employers are seemingly disinvesting in their 'flexible' workforce through reducing their expenditure on training, for example (Buchanan *et al.*, 2001, p. 19). In terms of whose interests are served through this particular set of personal attributes, the lack of community input into these three review reports is salient. Unlike the Finn and Mayer reports, the desired personal attributes of workers are solely industry and employer defined.

The project of constructing and reconstructing an industry-defined set of desired personal attributes is necessarily about changing the capacities of workers so that they may fit changing industry needs. Employers' conflicting expectations of workers in a ratcheted up, intensified, high-performance workplace where increased competition, pressure and worker responsibility are the norm could very well require a greater level of cognitive sophistication and self-management skills. The new workplace, with its flattened management structures and a new onus on workers to manage their relations with co-workers, could very well require the development of 'Emotional Intelligence'. The new emphasis on 'lifelong learning' and the 'learning to learn' competency can very well be understood to be a requirement of workers in conditions where fast-changing work practices outstrip educational institutions' capacity to respond. In such conditions, in order to maintain their employability workers may well need to manage their own learning on a 'just-in-time' and 'just-for-me' basis (Kearns, 2001, pp. 44–45). Yet many of these required new capacities, or 'competencies', are talked about in ways that suggest they are innate possessions of individuals.

Variations and inconsistencies in the classificatory schemes across and sometimes within the three review reports are both symptomatic of the different local conditions of production and source material of the various reports and of the intractable difficulties inherent in translating 'personal attributes' into the conceptual framework of skills and competencies. Indeed, Kearns concedes that there is no useful way of distinguishing personal attributes and values from skills, and notes that, as the range of expert papers in the DeSeCo project demonstrated, there is no international consensus on the identification of generic skills (Kearns, 2001, pp. 34, 76). Yet one of the major aims of the review reports discussed here was to clarify the Key Competencies and, for Curtis and McKenzie at least, to clarify the terminology. Further, different conceptions of human subjectivity circulating in the source documents create some conceptual problematics. Kearns, for instance, rests much of his formulation of a new framework of generic skills on the expert opinion papers of the DeSeCo project in which models of human subjectivity informed by cognitive psychology predominate. He argues that the new framework for generic skills should be guided by findings from cognitive science at the same time as calling for a 'new humanism' in VET (Kearns, 2001, p. 49) without registering the tensions between humanist and cognitive conceptions of human subjects.¹¹

It seems that the current search for generic or employability skills has served only to produce a discursive explosion which has resulted in a proliferation of conflicting schemata and meanings. In this respect, the dilemma originally posed by the Finn and Mayer reports is no closer to being resolved. Curtis and McKenzie nevertheless believe that it is more important to just get personal attributes built into a new framework of employability skills rather than definitively define and classify them. However, this conceptual confusion will likely confound educators' attempts to codify and implement competency-based training in 'personal attributes'. In the next section I examine how these conflicting classifications of 'personal attributes', and their implications for understanding personal attributes as learnable or innate, play out in discussions about teaching, learning and assessment of attributes.

Teaching, learning and assessment of personal attributes

It is in the attempts at 'operationalizing' personal attributes in educational programs that the problematic effects of the deployment of notions of attributes as innate or learned are thrown into sharpest relief. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that discussions of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are very sketchy in all reports, although it must be said that it was the question of what constitutes generic skills in the current economic circumstances which was their primary concern. However, 'learnability' or not is crucially important for determining if and how all or some of the personal attributes are incorporated into curricula and what sort of pedagogies and assessment are seen as appropriate.

In terms of teaching and learning, Kearns briefly refers to various active, student-centred learning strategies—such as action learning, situated learning and project-based learning—that encourage developing the attributes, habits and skills of motivated lifelong learners. He lists flexible learning strategies and online delivery as being appropriate technologies for learning generic skills for the information economy and suggests (citing an earlier OECD report) that fostering a lifelong learning capability for all may even involve developing a 'new pedagogy' (Kearns, 2001, pp. 58–60, 76). However, in indicating that underpinning personal attributes (in this instance 'willingness to learn', which I take to be akin to 'motivation' above) are able to be developed through learning strategies, Kearns seems to be cutting across his definition of 'skills' and 'personal attributes', and the mapping of their relationship, as previously outlined.

The OECD's DeSeCo project's executive summary from its final report, presented in the strategy paper, moves quickly from a definition and detailed description of the three Key Competency categories (Using tools interactively, Functioning in heterogeneous groups, Acting autonomously) to principles which should inform the development of a coherent assessment project with little to say about the education for the desired competencies. However, seemingly cutting across statements elsewhere that 'competencies are learned', as previously noted, at the very end of the executive summary there is a brief statement that the 'Key competencies are

assumed to be—at least to some extent—learnable and teachable. The learnable and the teachable elements therefore need to be specified' (OECD, 2002, p. 22).

Curtis and McKenzie take personal attributes to be a skill, albeit a 'soft' skill, without explicit reference to their learnability. However, they do discuss strategies to encourage education and training providers to include an overt focus on employability skills such as communication, creative problem-solving and teamwork skills (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001, p. 55). Given that the ACCI/BCA report separates 'skills' from 'personal attributes' and defines skills as learned capacities of individuals, it comes as no surprise that the report has very little to say about education for personal attributes, remarking only that workers are somehow expected to 'acquire' the desired personal attributes if they are not already in possession of them. The ACCI/BCA report refers the reader to Susan Dawe's 2002 report, *Focussing on generic skills in training packages*, which presents a variety of employer-provided developmental tools to assist in skills development.

It is worthwhile taking a detour through Dawe's report at this point because it offers a comprehensive and concrete picture of how personal attributes are being incorporated into vocational education and training in the workplace. Like the authors of the three review reports, Dawe believes that personal attributes, values, attitudes and work ethics should be included in any new formulation of generic skills. Through a literature review, examining 10 industry training packages, interviewing key stakeholders and some case studies, Dawe's report documents how employers in these industries go about developing in trainees the generic skills deemed essential to those industries, though many of the desired personal attributes are common across industries.

Dawe's report is interesting in showing that conflicting notions of personal attributes as learned or innate also circulate in industry settings with the same confounding effects. From her report it is apparent that enterprises base recruitment decisions primarily on personal attributes and generic skills because of the perception that it is more difficult and costly to change personality, values and attitudes (Dawe, 2002, p. 57). Yet, at another point, Dawe indicates that employers are prepared to embark on training to change their workers' subjectivities, noting that 'large enterprises may prefer to deliver their own training in values, attitudes and personal attributes specific for their particular enterprise or industry' (Dawe, 2002, p. 70). The very fact that the desired attributes of workers cited in the three review reports—for example, commitment, willingness to learn, flexibility, adaptability, self-confidence, a work ethic, self-reliance, self-regulation, and capacities of self-assessment and self-improvement—are those which employers attempt to engender through induction workshops and on- and off-the-job training through a great variety of pedagogical technologies demonstrates a belief in their learnability. In terms of how the desirable personal attributes are assessed in workplace training, Dawe simply reports that personal attributes, values and attitudes were part of the workplace skills assessments she studied, without giving any details, and recommends that training packages need to give more direction for assessment (Dawe, 2002, p. 7).

In the three review reports that are the focus of this paper, the difficulty of the task of assessing attributes is apparent. Curtis and McKenzie (2001, p. 52) concede that 'the issue of assessment and reporting of personal and interpersonal attributes is a complex one' but argue that

[w]hile the Mayer Committee was cautious in this area [inclusion of personal values and attitudes and other affective elements] because of perceived difficulties in learning and assessing values and attitudes, there is growing evidence that these entities can be assessed and therefore can legitimately be included within the framework.

Here they note that problem solving, critical thinking, team work, writing skills and interpersonal understanding have all been assessed for students in the higher education sector. Other assessment methods they cite include teacher observation and judgement, portfolio assessment, workplace-based assessment and instrumental assessment, noting that there are well-established methods for measuring attitudes (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001, pp. 57–59). However, attitude-measuring methods, usually in the form of questionnaires, are generally taken to be measures of innate predispositions for the purposes of employee selection, for example. They are not techniques for observing behaviours and the performance of competence, a common mode of competency assessment. It is not at all clear, therefore, that standard attitude measurement methods could be applied to the assessment of 'competency' in the desired personal attributes.

The ACCI/BCA and Curtis and McKenzie reports refer to standard industry practices for assessing the personal attributes of prospective employees. These include personal contact (e.g. face-to-face contact), formal interviews, initial telephone contact, work experience reports, school and training reports showing competencies and achievements, references from previous employers and others in the community (ACCI/BCA, 2002, p. 54). The ACCI/BCA report concludes this particular part of the discussion by stating that assessment of personal attributes requires further development and refers the reader to DETYA/ANTA's *Training package assessment materials* (2001).

Taking another detour through the *Training package assessment materials*, in a section titled 'Assessing competencies in higher qualifications', the authors discuss the importance of personal attributes but concede the difficulties of assessment. Unlike task-oriented behaviours, the authors write, personal behaviours are hard to observe and, further, assessment decisions may be seen as highly subjective and value laden (DETYA/ANTA, 2001, p. 59). Drawing on a case study of an institutional Registered Training Organization (RTO) in the welfare sector in which personal attributes are part of the assessment of the students' workplace project, the authors propose the use of a combination of observation of performance over a period of time and structured interviews to gather evidence about the ethics, values and attitudes of candidates in the context of their practice or work situation (DETYA/ANTA, 2001, pp. 60–61).

This proposed form of assessment does not resolve the difficulties the authors themselves raise, however. It is not just that assessors are inescapably 'subjective',

they are also inescapably located within the behavioural and other norms of their own professional, ethnic and other cultures. To act as an assessor, to qualify as an assessor, the assessor must necessarily position themselves within the regime of dominant cultural norms which defines competency standards and informs the assessment. The discursive construction of an 'ideal type' of 'competent' worker and the setting of competency standards is necessarily an attempt at normalization to the values, beliefs, and expectations of the dominant culture which defines them. Assessment of competency against such standards often works against members of cultures other than the dominant culture, such that the individual being assessed may be found wanting or 'incompetent'. The problems of assessing literacy competency across cultures, for example, led to an attempt to write 'the uncompetence agenda' which the authors hoped could rework notions of competency so as to include cultural difference and at the same time construct a broader vision of the competent subject (Luke, 1995, p. 91). The Anglo-centric discourses of the competent nurse embedded in the Australian Nursing Council's National Nursing Competencies, to take another example, produce expectations of a kind of nurse subject that does not accommodate diversity. This works to the disadvantage of overseas qualified nurses in competency assessment for registration in Australia (Molan, 2004).

Looking to international efforts, particularly the DeSeCo project, for guidance on assessment of personal attributes leads only to further problems. The guidelines for assessment presented in the strategy paper are so broad—that is, assessment should integrate all dimensions of a person as well as their different social, economic and political contexts; it has to score competency outcomes along a continuum from high to low competence; it must be relevant to assessing children as well as adults—and the three competency categories so complex (particularly the 'self-authoring' function) that it is hard to imagine developing an assessment instrument that could meet such requirements. Indeed, as the authors note, such measures do not currently exist. The DeSeCo strategy paper acknowledges the difficulty of the task and cautions against expecting anything in the near future, instead seeing the development of appropriate assessment instruments as a long term co-ordinated research and development activity requiring sustained political and economic support over many years (OECD, 2002, p. 18).¹²

The DeSeCo project, too, comes up against the problem of 'difference', acknowledging the difficulty of developing internationally comparable measures of 'acting autonomously' because 'autonomy', along with 'functioning in socially heterogeneous groups', is a feature of western modernity, democracy and individualism (Rychen & Hersh Salganik, 2000, p. 76; OECD, 2002, p. 18). At the same time as conceding the cultural specificity of these competencies, elsewhere in their discussion of the DeSeCo project's expert opinion papers, Rychen and Salganik (2000, p.73) claim that the capacity for autonomous action is a universal element of the human condition, not dependent on any society and culture. Constructing the competencies at an abstract level in order to 'universalize' them, as they recommend, certainly 'invisibilizes' cultural difference but does not erase it.

The DeSeCo project's idea of determining the distributions of these Key Competencies across different socio-economic groups and across countries as a prelude to targeting educational interventions works against the opinion of one of its own experts. Rychen and Hersch Salganik (2000, p. 74) note that, in his expert paper, anthropologist Jack Goody explicitly rejected engaging in a decontextualized discussion of the Key Competencies on the grounds that the context of practice must be considered. Goody also regarded as intractable the problem of specifying the Key Competencies at a level that can span cultures and at a level that would also be useful for developing measures. Further, he cautioned against what could be called a 'neo-colonial' impulse operative in the desire to extend the three competency areas from OECD countries to the rest of the world.

Conclusion

The current attempts to incorporate personal attributes into a revised set of generic or employability skills has not overcome the conceptual dilemma originally posed by the Finn and Mayer reports, namely the learnability or not of 'personal attributes', attitudes and values. I suggested that this ongoing problematic derives from unquestioned and often implicit assumptions and theories of human subjects, necessarily mobilized in any discussion of personal attributes, and the deployment of a nature/nurture binary in discussions of personal attributes. The three Australian review reports discussed here present conflicting ideas of personal attributes as learnable or not, which is related to their different definitions and categorization of 'skill' in their respective proposed skills frameworks. It is these sorts of inconsistencies, which emerge on a close reading of these documents, that I believe will create stumbling blocks to implementation of the proposed skills frameworks, and would require clarification in any further development of the frameworks. This is not to say, however, that these inconsistencies would actually be resolved by further efforts at clarification and better classification of personal attributes in relation to concepts of 'skill' and 'competence'. As suggested by this discussion, such efforts will only provoke a further discursive explosion, producing the same confusion and indeterminacy.

No matter if figured as 'learned' or 'innate', the whole project of accommodating personal attributes within skills frameworks, and thus making them available to educators' interventions, is necessarily an exercise in normalization. Even those personal attributes taken to be innate, no matter to what degree, must at least be rendered amenable to assessment. Apart from a certain incongruity inherent in the idea of benchmarking levels of acceptable performance for the purposes of assessing competency in 'personal attributes', highlighted in the example that competency in 'acting autonomously' may be tested and scored in levels of proficiency, there are questions about who will determine 'competency standards' for personal attributes and assess individuals as competent or not in this respect, and on what grounds. What of learner-workers assessed as 'not yet competent' against benchmarks of

acceptable performance of personal attributes when these attributes are understood as innate? If personal attributes are not understood as learnable, how are those learner-workers to become competent? Such questions are likely to produce stumbling blocks as personal attributes and values are codified and implemented in training programs.

The designation as 'competent' or 'not yet competent' in personal attributes threatens to become a new mode of distributing individuals around norms of behaviours and 'ways of being' at work. A whole range of consequences for individual learner-workers flow on from that distribution, as is well recognized in educational literature. Resistance to efforts at normalization is registered in a variety of ways—in the refusal, by some, of the whole project and, by others, in its contestation. In any event, the vagaries of 'translation' of policy to practice will undoubtedly see training and assessment in personal attributes, and the desired personal attributes themselves, challenged, resisted, ignored, or appropriated in various ways by educators, trainers and learner-workers alike.

Notes

1. This paper is drawn from an Australian Research Council funded project (2002–4), 'Changing Work, Changing Workers, Changing Selves: A Study of Pedagogies in the New Vocationalism'. The chief investigators are Clive Chappell, Nicky Solomon, Mark Tennant and Lyn Yates, all of the University of Technology, Sydney.
2. The reports are Peter Kearns (2001), *Review of research: generic skills for the new economy*; David Curtis and Phillip McKenzie (2001), *Employability skills for Australian industry: literature review and framework development*; and ACCI/BCA (2002), *Employability skills for the future*.
3. See, for instance, Rose (1999), du Gay (1996) and Gee *et al.* (1996).
4. Particularly, in the United Kingdom, the NCVQ Core Skills and, in the United States, ASTD/DOL *Workplace basics: the skills employers want* (1988), subsequently taken up in the Secretary of the Department of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report (1991). This latter report's list of generic skills includes 'personal qualities' such as individual responsibility, self-esteem, self-management, sociability, integrity and honesty (cited in Kearns, 2001, p. 13).
5. Note that 'team skills' itself was the only one of the Finn Committee's 'personal and interpersonal characteristics' that fell within the definition of a Key Competency on the Mayer Committee's test.
6. According to Kearns (2001, p. 27), these included the 1999 formulation of the Australian National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century, for example, which included personal qualities such as self-confidence, optimism, high self-esteem. These goals were taken up by the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001).
7. Particularly, for Kearns, the revised British key skills which now included personal attributes and values (National Skills Task Force, 2000), Employability Skills 2000+ (Canada) and the OECD's DeSeCo project.
8. See Reich (2002) for a discussion of how the problematization of longstanding industrial relations arrangements and work practices, and notions of the 'skilled worker' associated with these, was a necessary prelude to industry restructuring in the 1980s. See a similar argument in Usher (1997).

9. Kearns' construction of the desired personal attributes draws heavily on the OECD's DeSeCo project. While I refer to the official publications from the project, published after Kearns' report, all the relevant background papers and discussions were available on the DeSeCo project's Web site at the time of Kearns' writing. It is these documents that Kearns' discussion refers to.
10. For critical commentaries on the concept of 'Emotional Intelligence' see Boler (1999, Chapter 3), and McWilliam *et al.* (1999). See Cruikshank (1996) for a critical commentary on 'self esteem'.
11. Usher and Edwards (1994, Chapter 2) offer a useful outline of how cognitive and humanist psychology, amongst other schools of psychological thought, have found their way into theories and practices of education and, further, how these two in particular sit in some tension with each other.
12. The difficulty of the task is reflected in the timeline for developing the assessment instruments. The project anticipates that developing an assessment for 'acting autonomously' will enter its exploratory stage in 2010, with no indication of when it will become a major focus of efforts.

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