‘Generic Skills for Employability’:
Educational Colonisation or Educational Opportunity?
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Introduction
Over the last two years, the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) has focused many research projects on the notion of ‘generic skills’ and how these can be integrated into vocational education provision. The trend to generic skills promises a new approach for educators and trainers who have struggled for a decade with the demands of competency-based training packages and performative assessment. On the other hand, the generic skills agenda is strongly influenced by business and employer groups, and therefore needs to be carefully scrutinised. Many of the assumptions and implications of the current generic skills ‘movement’ have been challenged by critical educational commentators such as Peter Kearns (), Andrew Gonczi(2002), Cathy Down(2000,2001) and Paul Comyn(2002).

In 2002 I was one of a team1 at Workplace Learning Initiatives (WLI), a small private research and training organization in Melbourne, working on one of several NCVER-funded research projects which aimed to explore the nature and potential application of generic skills. Our project investigated the meaning of generic skills in relation to and through the perspectives and experiences of retrenched and otherwise displaced workers.

In this paper we will firstly review some of the debates surrounding generic skills and make a brief analysis of the political and economic context. Secondly, we will discuss the implications of those findings including those which challenge prevailing assumptions about ‘generic skills’, ‘employability’, and about ‘transferability’. The findings point to the need for a renewed focus on pedagogy and the need for learners and workers to develop a metalanguage for the skills, qualities and attributes they have learned and accumulated through life.

What are ‘generic skills’?
Generic skills used to be known as ‘core skills’, ‘key competencies’, ‘underpinning skills’ or ‘capabilities’ (Mayer1992). More recently, ‘skills’ have come to include ‘personal attributes’ and to be linked with values and identity. The commonly accepted definition is that generic skills are “those transferable skills which are essential for employability at some level for most” (Kearns 2001 p.2), and the phrase ‘generic skills for employability’ is now in common usage in policy and research (Curtis and MacKenzie 2001) (Kearns 2001).

The term ‘generic skills for employability’ invites examination. According to the recent ACCI/BCA review, generic skills for employability are those skills that contribute to industry and business interests (such as flexibility, adaptability and ‘self-managed skill currency’). Curtis and McKenzie (2001) note that the term employability,

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1. including Peter Waterhouse, Crina Virgona, and Robin Sefton
is more attractive as a descriptor than employment-related since it conveys a greater sense of an individual’s long-term capacity to build a career and to prosper in a dynamic labour market. Employability implies qualities of resourcefulness, adaptability and flexibility, whereas employment-related suggests an orientation to the current state of the labour market (Curtis & McKenzie 2001, p.6).

In other words, it implies that people need certain pre-defined skills, attributes and values in order for them to become ‘employable’. The responsibility for employment has thus shifted the individual who is now individually responsible for becoming employable: in other words, to have a particular identity and set of attributes and skills as defined by employers.

Generic skills have been a focus of research and development in OECD countries by education systems, governments and employer bodies since the early 90s. The emphasis on generic skills is part of the move towards developing ‘human capital’ to meet the demands of the ‘new knowledge economy’. Economic output is becoming more information and knowledge-intensive and thus there needs to be a continual upgrading of the skills and competencies of the workforce. Lifelong learning is now necessary, to enable workers to constantly adapt to change in order to maintain employment and to utilise the latest knowledge technologies. The underlying idea is that the rate of change through economic restructuring and emerging technologies and industries is such that it is now impossible to predict what skills will be required. Workers will need the capacity to adapt and continually upgrade through sets of generic skills that can be readily transferred across different settings (Curtis and McKenzie, 2001 p. vii).

One story is that the shift from ‘skills for employment’ to ‘skills for employability’ reflects neo-liberal ideology of individualism and ‘weakest go to the wall’. It is a further move away from the social democratic environment of the 80s and early 90s when the Labor government acknowledged an obligation to provide training and re-training for workers displaced by industry re-structuring and as a way of stimulating new industries. The policy then was mainly to produce a trained and skilled industrial workforce. VET focused on technical skills, competency-based training, performative assessment and national training packages. Now with de-regulation and trans-national takeovers, Australian industry is locked into struggles for profit and survival with their global competitors, and high rates of unemployment have become a permanent feature. Seen in this context, the discourse of ‘generic skills for employability’ raises the bar for who gets in and who gets locked out of work.

The DeSeCo process
An alternative story is reflected in the OECD DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies)(2003) project to build an agreed theoretical basis for generic skills, and an agreed set of indicators for progress wards implementing key competencies.

According to the DeSeCo website, ‘generic skills’ should meet economic, productivity-related and social justice aims. They are for:

- producing an adaptive, qualified labor force, and
• creating an environment for innovation in a world dominated by global competition innovation in context of global competition.
• increasing individual understanding of public policy issues and participating in democratic processes and institutions.
• Social cohesion and justice
• Strengthening human rights and autonomy

(http://www.statistik.admin.ch/stat_ch/ber15/deseco/intro.htm)

The generic employability skills proposed by The European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) include:
“critical thinking: ability to think through a problem or situation, distinguishing between facts and prejudices” and “a sense of service to the community, civic mindedness” (ACER Report).

However, this broad, social and educational vision of generic skills has not taken on as yet in Australia.

**ACER Review: Employability Skills for Australian Industry**
The ACER review: ‘Employability skills for Australian Industry’ produced for the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Curtis and Mackenzie 2001) is the framework that ANTA has taken up as the basis for training development. The ACER framework is built around basic foundation skills, intellectual abilities and personal attributes.
On one level, the ACCI/BCA framework for generic skills is a more comprehensive and intelligent framework than the previous Mayer (192) versions which contained checklists of work skills that were disconnected and unidimensional. However, the

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Basic Skills</th>
<th>Intellectual Abilities</th>
<th>Personal Attributes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foundation skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Thinking skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Continuous learning</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Listens and understands and speaks clearly and directly</td>
<td>Able to make decisions</td>
<td>Acknowledges the need to</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understands written documents and writes clearly</td>
<td>Capable problem-solver</td>
<td>learn in order to accommodate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands tables of figures, able to interpret graphs, able to calculate</td>
<td>Innovative – adapts to new situations</td>
<td>change</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>Open to new ideas and techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information and communications technology skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Contextual understanding</strong></td>
<td>Is prepared to invest time and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is aware of and willing to use a range of technologies</td>
<td>Knows own role in the work situation</td>
<td>effort in learning new skills</td>
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<td>Uses technology to seek, process, and present information</td>
<td>Understands interrelationships among workplace processes and systems</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Can diagnose systems (process) deficiencies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Can design, implement, and monitor corrective actions</td>
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<td><strong>Organisational skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Interpersonal skills</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is able to manage own time and to seek needed resources to complete set tasks</td>
<td>Shows cultural sensitivity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sets goals and engages others in achieving those goals</td>
<td>Committed to client service</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishes clear project goals and deliverables</td>
<td>Able to negotiate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allocates people and other resources (eg budgets, materials, space) to tasks</td>
<td>Works well with others, individually and in teams</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sets time lines and coordinates sub-tasks</td>
<td>Shows leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>is able to adapt resource allocations to cope with contingencies</td>
<td>Can develop a strategic vision, set goals, and monitor performance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communicates goals and targets, engages and endorses subordinates towards a shared vision</td>
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*Note: * Indicates that the attribute is expected of experienced workers, but not of new entrants to the workforce
ACCI framework does not include the critical thinking, citizenship, human development and equity aims of the OECD models.

In addition to the ‘official’ ACCI/BCA framework, is another list of generic skills in a discussion paper on the ACCI website: (http://www.acci.asn.au/index_policypapers.htm).

Here, the attributes desired by employers are listed as:

- 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

It is stated in the ACCI paper that this ACCI framework is being vigorously promoted at MCEETYA and other policy-making bodies. ANTA in fact has rejected this ‘unofficial’ framework ( ), but it is significant in that it is a crude reflection of employer requirements for enthusiastic and compliant workers: the engineering of personal identity in the service of marketing, competition and profit.

The role of employer bodies in defining the future VET curriculum has been contested by a number of authors and researchers. John Payne, in his paper ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Skill’ writes that “we have reached a point … where ‘skill’ means whatever employers and policy-makers want it to mean (Payne 2000, p.361) He argues that if educators choose employers’ definitions of skills, questions of inequality and discrimination may become critical as the social construct of skills overlaps with attitudinal, behaviour and character traits which are embedded in the cultural capital of certain social groups. He notes the expectation for the training system to produce appropriately groomed graduates:

Not only does this promise to cast the VET system in a new and unfamiliar role of speech training and personal grooming ‘makeovers’, but the fact that individuals may be expected to have their personal and class based identities re-engineered in this way raises major ethical concerns as well as the possibility of adverse psychological side effects for those whose self-image now comes under closer scrutiny (Payne 2000, p.363).

In a similar vein, Willmott (1993) talks about ‘corporate culturalism’ which threatens to undermine the social and intellectual infrastructure of democratic society because it demands that we relinquish critical assessment in favour of unfounded corporate loyalty (1997, p. 191).
The threat of Japanese-style ‘corporate culturalism’ and the potential role of the public education system in doing the cultural training and personality make-overs is not the full story. There is also a more educational and community-oriented discourse of ‘skills for employability and for life’ (eg, Kearns 2003). In this discourse, as in the DeSeCo process, there is a blending of ‘employability’, ‘developmental’ and community aims. The inclusion of attributes and values implies a focus on the cognitive and interpersonal foundations of learning. This in turn necessitates a renewed focus on pedagogy: experiential learning, adult learning principles, independent learning, and more dynamic and holist, cooperative and learner-centred pedagogies (Kearns 2001).

Andrew Gonczi is paper delivered at the DeSeCo Symposium, calls for a ‘new paradigm of learning’ that he says is implied by the generic skills discussions.

This includes:
- An integrated, relation approach that links the attributes of individuals to the demands of tasks,
- Taking account of the affective, psychological, physical, moral and cognitive aspects of individuals, and,
- A focus on process rather than content. (Gonczi 2002)

Gonczi also refers to advances in neuroscience, cognitive science and learning theory to link his discussion of generic skills to his rejection of the behaviourist, competency approach, and his calls for the more holistic approach to learning that the ‘generic skills movement’ engenders.

‘Making Experience Work: Generic Skills Through the Eyes of Displaced Workers’

With this kind of critique, and these contrasting approaches to generic skills as a backdrop, the WLI team developed a proposal for NCVER to explore generic skills in relation to the experiences, skills, and employment outlooks of displaced workers around Australia. The findings of this research project support the calls by Kearns, Gonczi and others for more holistic, developmental, experiential approaches to training and education.

We focused on displaced workers (who mainly older, experienced workers who had been retrenched or lost employment in some other way) for a number of reasons:
- The significant challenges they were facing in addressing requirements for employability in the ‘New Economy’.
- That they could be expected to have a wide range of generic skills based on a life-time’s experience in work, home and community activities,
- That they had already managed a number of transitions in their career,

Research Questions

We asked the questions:
- How are generic skills perceived and understood by displaced workers?
- How have working people developed generic skills?
- How has work contributed to the development of generic skills?
• How do generic skills transfer to a new context?
• How can VET practitioners foster the development of generic skills?
• How can enterprises foster generic skills development?
• How can the VET system best assist the development of generic skills for the new workforce?
• What is the relationship between generic skills and employability?

Method

Data were collected from 127 displaced workers in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide. The participants completed a survey questionnaire and were interviewed either individually or in small groups. The sample represented a broad cross-section of jobs and levels of education. It included a number of displaced Telstra, Ansett, I.T, banking and manufacturing workers, as well as people such as single mothers who had retrained to join the workforce but had over a significant period of time been unable to find work.

For this study, the Mayer framework of competencies was extended to include ‘cultural understanding’, ‘understanding/designing systems, adapting to change’, ‘being creative and innovative’. As a basis of discussion, and to introduce the idea of generic skills to participants, was also that of Field’s (1991) iceberg diagram that provided a metaphor for generic skills as ‘submerged’ or ‘underpinning’ skills.

The transcripts of interviews and focus groups were analysed with a ‘grounded theory’ approach and quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed with Microsoft Access.

Results

The majority of participants readily identified with the notion of ‘generic skills’ and were able to make a good account of their own generic skills development once they clearly grasped what it meant. Many were lacking in confidence because of frequent knock backs. The discussion about generic skills tended to affirm their sense of self worth, particularly in the case of unemployed mature workers who had accumulated a store of skills and wisdom over years of participation in the workforce and community.

The participants frequently talked about their ‘generic skills’ as ‘skills of life’, ‘part of growing up’. One said, ‘you don’t realise them even if they are there” and another described them as ‘automated skills’ that become part of who you are”. One woman saw her ‘generic skills’ as the outcome of years of struggle and learning. Others saw them in terms of being ‘savvy’, or “being to play different roles, like an actor.” Most rated themselves highly against each of the generic skills listed in the questionnaire.

Overall, the participants said that ‘work’ is the most important source of their generic skills (53%), followed by ‘self-teaching and experience’ (22%), ‘home and community activities’ (11.5%), then formal, post school training (6.3%) and school (5%). Overall, work, experience, self-teaching and home and community activities accounted for about 90% of their generic skills development, and formal training.
about 10%. Rather than a vote of no confidence in the school and tertiary training systems, this result could be partly the result of how the questions were framed and the fact that the cohort was on average in their mid-forties. Nevertheless, it does say something important about how people view their skills as intrinsic to their personhood, and the accumulation of life experiences, especially through working. “As one participant said, once you leave school you become responsible for other people…” The implication was that this is when you mature and learn the really important things of life.

**How generic skills develop at work**

The project participants gave rich accounts of their learning in all sorts of ways at work. A number of these have been written up as case studies in the report. For example, there is John, who was forced to change his style of management by verbal abuse as the result of professional development and changing management expectations. He was evolving new work place identity as he actually learned to consult and negotiate and ask questions rather than ‘sound off’. Then there was Roy, who saw a potential conflict situation at work and took the initiative to try to sort it out. Since then he has developed skills in negotiation and status as a result amongst the other workers. His learning, like that of quite of quite a few others, was the result of taking the initiative when a challenge presented itself, and thus taking on a new role. Ben describes how he learned from being an itinerant worker in Northern Australia for many years, and says that that is how he learned so many technical skills and the ability to be adaptable. He also talks about he learned about team work from being a musician in a band, and how he learned patience and persistence from months in hospital after losing a leg in an industrial accident. All of these stories seem to bear out the ideas put forward by Kearns of the inter-related and embodied nature of generic skills and attributes: his developmental framework with ‘autonomy, self-mastery and self-direction’ at the centre of the four clusters of skills and attributes (2001).

**Transferability**

Policy suggests that generic skills are inherently transferable from one context to another. The majority of the participants (68%) also believed that their skills would be transferable from one job to another. But are these skills so unproblematically transferable as it would seem? Our research (and that of other recent researchers) has also shown that generic skills are only manifested in contexts and do not exist in the abstract. The different understandings of generic skills that people had and the vastly different contexts suggest that not all skills are transferable without some mediating process such as reflection and analysis of the skills and what is required in new situations. There may be a need for people to be trained and supported in identifying their generic skills and adapting them for different jobs and contexts. Unfortunately, the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process has almost priced itself out of existence at $15,000 for people to be assisted in documenting their prior learning, skills and attributes.

A number of people said that it was not that their skills were not transferable, but that potential employers have shown little or no interest in generic skills and instead have focused on narrowly defined sets of technical skills. Thus, more mature and experienced workers were being passed over (by younger employment officers) for young, newly qualified people who conform better to the skills specifications of jobs.
A focus group in an older person’s employment support network in Adelaide made the ironic comment that perhaps it was managers and employers who needed to do generic skills training, so they would realise the benefits of ‘organisational memory’ and depth of experience and wisdom that older workers bring.

**Generic skills and employability**

It became clear through this research that having generic skills for employability in no way guarantees actual employment. The vast majority of those interviewed would be highly employable and find no problem in gaining employment in a different economic context. Clearly, lack of jobs or employment opportunities was the major issue facing most of these people. After talking about their generic skills they spoke about their frustrations and a system that seemed to discriminate against age and experience, in some cases even when tertiary re-training had been undertaken for ‘the new economy’. A few people in their early thirties said that they already felt they were considered old, and in fact were old for the jobs they were now trying for. One highly trained ex-Ansett flight attendant was turned down from hospitality jobs because people felt suspicious of her earlier higher salary and her experience.

Several people we spoke to who had been bank employees spoke of the new management regimes that were determined to rid the bank of the experienced employees so young graduates could be employed. The pressures for productivity, to sell so many loans per months to clients they had known for years, in order to reach performance targets destroyed employee morale and hence the conditions for generic skills either to be appreciated or developed. A few spoke of ‘management by fear’ especially for contract workers who have no security of tenure and must constantly be seen to perform and conform.

This aspect of the ‘new workforce’ is clearly the antithesis of the aspiration for workplaces to become centres where people learn and acquire not only technical skills but a whole range of generic communication, organisational, management and self-management skills. They were far from ‘learning organisations’ in which people are able to learn by freely communicating with management and other workers and progressively being able to participate in aspects of management, decision-making and organisational change.

**Challenges to the VET system**

I think there are at least four challenges to researchers, policy-makers and the VET system as a whole, coming out of this project.

The first is to unpick the nexus between generic skills and employability, by realising that of the many factors that determine whether any one individual is able to find suitable employment, the possession of the appropriate ‘generic skills’ is only one. By putting those two words together, a powerful discourse is created that obscures the realities and causes of unemployment. Of all the people we interviewed, there did not appear to be any whose unemployment was primarily a result of their lacking generic skills.

On the other hand, people seeking work do need to be able to take stock of their generic skills, to develop frameworks and a metalanguage for acknowledging and
claiming the stores of skills, wisdoms, capabilities and attributes that they have developed throughout life and work, and which would qualify them for a range of jobs. In TAFE colleges and at the DOME (Don’t Overlook Mature Expertise) organization in Adelaide, we saw some inspiring examples of how people are working with unemployed workers to support and ‘train’ them in just such a way. However, this kind of training and awareness-raising does not need to be carried out under the misleading rubric of ‘skills for employability’.

The second challenge is about pedagogy and assessment. There are currently a number of research projects exploring how generic skills can be integrated into National Training Packages and assessed as such. Herein lies a problem. The generic skills of the people in this research were not the kind of skills that could be divided into individual competencies and taught for later performative assessment. The ‘skills’ as we have named them in fact were manifested in completely different ways according to different contexts. These could not easily be replicated in training situations.

According to Down’s recent research (2002) the current education and assessment paradigm in VET is geared to formal learning which favours mechanisms for patterning and linear logic. Generic skills, however, usually involve learning through trial and error involving risk and experimentation. Teaching for transferability requires commitment to these principles, which she notes, are far from the discourse of current practice and unlikely to be embraced by VET policy and practice. Current assessment practice requires the uncritical reproduction of skills as defined by the pre-determined elements of competence. Hence what is required is not just a small adjustment to a current practice, but a re-identification of the role of practitioners and their adoption of new practices. This is also a matter of pedagogy – how generic skills can be ‘taught’. Within the dominant discourse, generic skills are constructed as inherently unproblematic and assessable, as if they were carried as discrete entities within the person. This approach leads an individualistic and atomistic approach to the development of generic skills in education and training, and begs the question of how people learn. However, we understand ‘generic skills’ as being embodied in the person, situated and context-bound. Our research also indicates that generic skills are developed not in isolation, but in social contexts, through ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991).

The WLI study therefore reinforces the view of Kearns, Gonczi, Down and others about the need for experiential learning that is more holistic and systems-based. Generic skills can be developed in relation to particular contexts but not in the abstract. Learners need to have opportunities for reflection and evaluation of their generic skills in the context of experiential learning. They also need a (non-prescriptive) framework in which to profile their generic skills in relation to particular work contexts and to develop portfolios of their particular skills.

The continual development of such portfolios links with the need to integrate an orientation to lifelong learning into all VET courses. For this to happen, learners need more that ‘learning to learn skills’, but to be motivated and enthused with a love of learning and enough confidence about their own skills and possible futures to make it seem worthwhile.
The third challenge is about VET how it can be influenced. The board of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) is comprised mainly of business and industry leaders and the main if not the only stakeholders in the development of VET policy are business and industry employers. The current rhetoric is that ANTA is responsible to its clients who consist of both employers and learners. Educators are currently not seen either as clients or serious stake-holders.

But educators and researchers have a significant role in ‘bottom-up’ processes of policy development and modification. Those charged with developing and implementing policy in relation to generic skills have to tread a difficult path between contradictory tendencies and possibilities. How do we embrace ‘generic skills’ without furthering the ‘corporate cultural agenda’ of employer groups that would use public education and training to produce loyal, obedient workers lacking critical abilities and a sense of community needs and rights? How do we build holistic, developmental pedagogies that take into account attributes and values without tinkering with learners’ personal identities and values in a way that is well-meaning but equally illegitimate?

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