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The Work Ethic, the School Curriculum and Education for Democracy

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ABSTRACT The main purpose of this article is to explore some of the ways we need to think about work if we are to teach it as a ‘good’ for the self and society. The social, cultural, technological and economic developments of ‘new times’ have led to enormous changes in the kind of work people do and this has given rise to opportunities for a new relationship between the self, work and society, which can be culturally enriching for self and community, but which also carries with it certain dangers. To begin with, the work ethic and some of the ideas associated with it will be explicated with a brief reference to its historical origins and the interpretations of various social analysts, in particular those of John Dewey. The author then goes on to examine the ways in which these ideas might be applied to teaching and learning about work in a school context. This will involve looking at the informal and the formal level of the curriculum, and addressing questions to do with the way we expose pupils to various meanings of work, what it means to do ‘good’ work and what alternative teaching approaches might be envisaged.

Introduction

In a democratic society, the hope is that all citizens will have jobs which are worth doing, both in terms of their own interests and desires, as well as the interests of society as a whole. To advocate work as a creative, meaningful, self-fulfilling and socially productive activity requires us to see it as a virtuous activity, rooted in the identity of people as moral beings, and thus to argue for a version of the old idea of a ‘work ethic’, albeit one reconstructed in accordance with the cultural understandings and the social reality of contemporary society. The central feature of the work ethic is the idea that work is valued in and for itself irrespective of any
financial benefit, which may accrue to the individual. A worker who subscribes to the work ethic is self-motivated, and will not need to be coerced or enticed into doing a ‘good job’, since it is intrinsic to his or her self-identification as a moral being that the work done is socially necessary and carried out in accordance with certain standards.

This is counter to the view that, in contemporary society, the work ethic is in decline and that this is no bad thing because there will be less work in the future as society becomes more leisure dominated (see Watts, 1983). The view taken here is that work as creative effort is and will always be a necessary and desirable social activity, even if it is unpaid and regarded as a leisure activity. The work/leisure dualism is clearly only helpful when work means employment and leisure is time off work. However, in the present circumstances, there are new possibilities both in paid work and leisure for endeavour to be informed by a new work ethic. What hopefully will be in terminal decline is a version of the work ethic where duty is emphasised rather than rights, coercion and control at the expense of freedom of choice, and employment as opposed to a wider definition of work.

The main purpose of this article is to explore some of the ways we need to think about work if we are to teach it as a ‘good’ for the self and society. The social, cultural, technological and economic developments of ‘new times’ have led to enormous changes in the kind of work people do and this has given rise to opportunities for a new relationship between the self, work and society, that can be culturally enriching for self and community, but which also carries with it certain dangers. To begin with, the work ethic and some of the ideas associated with it will be explicated with a brief reference to its historical origins and the interpretations of various social analysts, in particular those of John Dewey. I shall then go on to examine the ways in which these ideas might be applied to teaching and learning about work in a school context. This will involve looking at the informal and the formal level of the curriculum, and addressing questions to do with the way we expose pupils to various meanings of work, what it means to do ‘good’ work and what alternative teaching approaches might be envisaged.

**Religion, the Work Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism**

In its modern form, the work ethic has been associated with the rise of capitalism (see Weber, 1930), but it is important to remember that the idea can be traced back to pre-modern times, where it had a distinctly different meaning. In medieval society, work had its place within a social system conceived as a whole where activities were related to a hierarchy of functions, each of which had value at its own level, as long as it contributed to the common purpose of society as defined by the Church. Thus, every individual’s work had a moral significance and was a ‘holy’ business, carried out for spiritual purposes. What we would now describe as economic activities were included under this moral umbrella, but they
were not ethically equivalent to each other. Some economic activities were distinctly more ‘perilous to the soul’ than others and the more pecuniary the motive the more ‘dangerous’ the activity became. For medieval thinkers like St Thomas Aquinas, labour was a noble and honourable activity, but trade was more suspect and finance, whilst not exactly immoral was a high risk activity from a spiritual point of view.

All this was to change in the three centuries from the later middle ages to the early eighteenth century where a new version of the work ethic gradually formed under the impact of economic and political changes in the period of the Reformation. It was the Reformation which fostered the work ethic in a manner that made it compatible with a developing economic system where making profits and capital accumulation were the very lifeblood, namely capitalism. Both Weber (1930) and Tawney (1926) have charted this developing and mutually confirming and reinforcing association between religious non-conformity and capitalism, as expressed, for example, in the social psychology of members of religious movements like Puritanism. For Tawney, it was the *“moral self sufficiency” of the Puritan which *“nerved his will but corroded his sense of social solidarity” (p. 29) and made capitalist relations more acceptable by blinding him or her to the social injustices, which were a consequence of economic activities. This individualism stemmed from a view of the individual believer as one who had a responsibility for his or her own spiritual development and needed no intermediaries between the self and God with whom a personal relationship was established through the individual’s own efforts.

It is the individualistic and ascetic view of the work ethic that, in its secularised form, is bequeathed to us today. From a capitalist perspective, it has a number of advantages. Work is seen as a social duty, it staves off idleness, fosters thrift and sobriety and contributes to social order. It is regarded as a central life activity that individual workers have, in a sense, chosen for themselves, the contract with the employer being analogous to the contract with God, since *“God hath given to man a reason for this use, that he should first consider, then choose, then put into execution ...”* (Steele, 1684, quoted in Tawney, 1926, p. 240). It is thus also, to quote Noon & Blyton (1997), a *“conscientious endeavour” involving *“disciplined compliance” (p. 48). In summary, as these authors point out, what all this boils down to in modern times is a version of the work ethic, which involves *“...the belief that it is the duty of everyone to treat productive work as their central life activity and to perform it with diligence and punctuality under the direction and control of managers”* (p. 48). It assumes a view of self-in-the-world where, like the Puritans, one takes the existing set up for granted, being focused rather narrowly on the self, one’s immediate environment and one’s day-to-day existence, rather than on wider issues and the *‘big questions’ about the overall purpose of work. The Puritans, of course, did attend to higher moral imperatives, but only in so far as the self in relation to God was concerned, which in effect
meant taking little interest in the details of the impact of their activities on society generally.

**Alienation and False Consciousness**

To describe the ‘work as life activity’ approach of the Puritans as informed by a work ethic – even in such an attenuated form – is perhaps still to give it too much credence For Marxists, Christian Socialists and other critics of capitalism, the mode of work in capitalist society was the very antithesis of its meaning in the moral tradition referred to above. Under capitalist economic conditions, to do work or to be in work was to be in a social relationship “with some other who has control over the means of productive effort” (Williams, 1976, p. 280) and where endeavour was not an expression of a mutually fulfilling relation between people but was alienated labour which left “no other nexus between man and man than naked self interest, than callous cash payment” (Marx & Engels, p. 82). For Marx this cash nexus stood over and above human beings determining their actions and their psychology in a way which prevented them realising their “species powers” (i.e. human qualities). In this way, human beings became estranged, separated or alienated from their life and work activity, from their products, from their fellow men and from their “species being”. They were estranged from their work over which they had little control, from the objects they produced which had little personal significance for them, from their fellow human beings with whom they were in competition, and from their own capacities and sense of agency, which were constrained by economic imperatives.

Of course, in the Marxist version of alienation and some other versions, like that of Fromm’s (1949), for example, which interpret alienation as endemic to work in a capitalist society, “being estranged” is viewed as a state of being which people are not necessarily able to articulate fully. They may, of course, experience feelings of alienation – they may feel their work is a meaningless activity, feel dominated by the boss, have conflictual relations with other workers, and feel bored and stultified, rather than fulfilled by the daily grind of work – but equally they may feel happy or reasonably contented with their lot, and not at all alienated or estranged. For the Marxist, the latter would be a form a self-deception or false consciousness.

False consciousness is an unfashionable term, but in the context of a discussion of the self and work is still retains its usefulness as an analytic tool. We know the self has hidden depths and that the individual’s understanding of the self cannot be grasped in its totality at the level of consciousness (see Taylor, 1985; White, 1990). However, like the Freudian concept of unconscious motivation, false consciousness is vulnerable to the charge that it fails to provide a means whereby hypotheses about events in the world can ever be proved right or wrong. If we hypothesise that worker X is alienated, then the evidence can either take the form of X’s avowals as to feelings of alienation or denials of such feelings – it being
assumed in the latter instance that the worker has a false consciousness. Thus, we do not have to search far for an interpretation, which can • ‘explain away’ any finding we may come up with. However, there is only a risk of •‘bad’ explanation if we adopt a determinist model of the impact of social forces on a person’s psychology. If, on the other hand, we assume the worker is a moral agent, then we have to acknowledge the possibility that the meaning attributed to work by an •‘objectively’ alienated worker may, in fact, be genuine, just as we have to acknowledge the possibility that it may be false (Lukes, 1977). There is nothing inherent in the concept of false consciousness that prevents us treating the person as agent and asking questions, which can be subjected to an empirical test. I shall return to this later in the discussion of teachers’ work.

Work and Education

Self-centredness of the Puritan kind, however, was not an inevitable accompaniment of the development of individualism, since, as the history of Western society has shown, there was an alternative path for the • ‘freed spirit’ of the individual – one which opened the way towards a more socially-orientated and democratic character structure. In this connection it will be useful to look at the views of John Dewey who has provided one of the clearest statements of a modern ethical view of work and the relationship between work and education. Like the Puritans, Dewey interpreted work as a •‘calling’ or a vocation, but his definition of this was secular and humanistic. For him a vocation was any purposeful and continuous activity which involved a service to others and also engaged • ‘personal powers’ in a way that fostered growth of the individual (Dewey, 1933, pp. 350–360). The opposite of •‘vocational’ was not •‘leisure’ or • ‘cultural’ activity, but activity that was aimless, capricious and involved • ‘parasitic dependence’ on others, rather than •“cumulative achievement in experience” for the individual. His definition thus referred to a person’s role in society (i.e. service to others), as well as to their development and growth as an individual. Vocational activities were thus educational and vice versa. There was a continuity between the vocationally orientated activities or occupations of pupils in school (i.e. educational activities) with adult occupations; as well as continuities between paid and unpaid work, and work that was •‘economic’ in a conventional sense and other types of work, which included nearly all activities in pursuit of social roles, including those carried out in institutions like schools. For him an occupation was vocational in the sense that it was socially useful and growth-enhancing, and thus educational for the individual. Education through engagement in occupations was like •‘good work’ at any age – there was no basic difference between a •‘calling’ as a child and one as an adult.

This ethical view of vocational education was accompanied by an analysis of •‘dangers and opportunities’ for its realisations in the •‘current context’, i.e. the early part of the twentieth century. Regarding
opportunities, in general terms, these are very similar to those a pragmatic and optimistic person of liberal democratic persuasion might identify today. Dewey felt that there was ‘increased esteem’ in a democratic society for manual labour and whatever else had to with ‘rendering tangible services to society’; there were ‘better “moral sentiments” involving a new valuing of social responsibility and personal capacity’ (p. 366). Similarly, the growth of technology and the stimulation of science by the economic revolution had increased what Dewey described as the ‘intellectual possibilities of industry’, although current industrial conditions tended, for the great mass of workers, to make industry less of an educational resource. Advances in the psychology of children’s learning were in line with the increasing importance of industry. “It reveals that learning is not the work of something ready-made called mind, but that mind itself is an organisation of original capacities into activities having significance” (p. 368). Play and work were thus not radically different activities; the passage from one to the other was to be gradual and no radical change of attitude was required.

Dewey also, of course, saw various dangers in the prevailing conditions. The industrial regime as currently in operation was divisive and feudal. In the following well known passage the implications for schools are spelt out:

any scheme for vocational education which takes its point of departure from the industrial regime that now exists is likely to assume and perpetuate its divisions and weaknesses and thus to become an instrument in accomplishing the feudal dogma of social predestination. Those who are in a position to make their wishes good will demand a liberal a cultural occupation, and one which fits for directive power the youth in whom they are directly interested. To split the system and give to others, less fortunately situated an education conceived mainly as specific trade preparations, to treat schools as an agency for transferring the older division of labour and leisure, culture and service, mind and body, directed and directive class, into a society nominally democratic. (p. 372)

A curriculum which acknowledged Dewey’s view of the link between education and work would offer an immediate challenge to both the traditional liberal and vocational curriculum as conventionally understood. It would include:

instruction in the historic background of present conditions; training in science to give intelligence and initiative in dealing with material and agencies of production; and the study of economics, civics and politics to bring the future worker in touch with the problems of the day ...
Above all, it would train power of readaptation to changing conditions so that future workers would not become blindly subject to a fate imposed upon them. (p. 372)

It is this emphasis on worker empowerment – on making workers critical – which has been interpreted by some (see Lewis, 1994) as an aspect of
Dewey’s model of vocational education, which is more radical than • “merely shifting from job-specific to merely generic vocationalism” (p. 213).

**Schools, Work and the Curriculum**

It is evident that Dewey’s view of the work ethic is very much in line with the kind of approach to work that a curriculum for life in • “reflexive modernity” (see Quicke, 1997) should foster. His thought is clearly consonant with that of the • ‘progressives’ (be they liberals or • ‘trainers’) of the current period and is grounded in similar assumptions about the need for a critical vocationalism. In fact, it is probably true to say that contemporary analyses (particularly those carried out by educationalists) of the vocational/liberal education divide and the proposals for overcoming this – indeed, the fact that it is regarded as a • ‘good thing’ that it should be overcome – not only rely heavily Dewey’s ideas, but in some respects are not much of an advance on his position.

The purpose of what follows is to explore, in the light of Dewey’s analysis, some of the opportunities for a successful reconstruction of the work ethic through curriculum development in schools, both in relation to the informal and formal aspects of the curriculum, as well as to identify some of the limitations of current approaches. The questions posed are: what do schools teach about work, how do they teach it and in what ways do they need to think about work in order to develop an appropriate work curriculum? Pupils and teachers need to be knowledgeable about current work practices, but they also need to be able to make judgements about how principles derived from a broader understanding of work might be applied to themselves and their situation.

**The Informal Curriculum**

Pupils experience something which is called • ‘work’ from the moment they enter school, where the play–work dualism soon becomes apparent. School is the first experience having to do work (unless of course, certain activities in the home have been identified as work, e.g. housework – see Leonard, 1990) and of being on the receiving end of someone who is doing paid work. For the most part, the idea of what is considered to be • ‘socially necessary’ about work is not seriously challenged. It is experienced as essentially an activity which is carried out for instrumental reasons and does not involve the • ‘real’ self. Evidence for this comes from a variety of sources, in particular from sociological studies in the ethnographic tradition. In his review of studies in this area, Peter Woods (1990) has noted that, although there is no simple relationship between teacher intentions and pupil actions, the message conveyed to pupils is that work has no intrinsic satisfaction; it is a question of • ‘buckling down’ and learning good work habits. Categories used to describe pupils typically include terms such as ‘idle’, ‘lazy’, • ‘good worker’, • ‘industrious’,

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needs to work harder', 'more effort required'. Pupils rarely claim to value 'work' as much as they do other activities, such as 'mixing with friends' or 'sport'. Those activities which are self-involving are not considered to be work. This carries over into post-school or college, where the only difference is that work is paid for. Sometimes work may be interesting, but whether interesting or not it is a common perception that existing forms of work have to be done if society is to survive and the individual is to make a living.

Teachers are often conscious of contradictions in their work practices, which stem from the need to retain a certain kind of professional identity and moral commitment in what is often an alienating school environment. They often find themselves having to balance what they perceive as their pragmatic with their paradigmatic concerns (see Hammersley, 1977) - the former are to do with ways of accommodating to the current situation and are often in tension with the latter which related to educational ideals - "how teaching ought to be, how it could be in ideal circumstances" (p. 38). It is in coping with the pressures emanating from this tension between their different concerns that teachers' work is accomplished and the meaning of work in schools constructed. Any formal curriculum input about the nature of work would have to take account of this informal curriculum, which in Foucauldian terms may constitute a 'contradictory discourse' about work. In particular it is important that the so-called work-related curriculum is developed with due regard to the various interpretations of what in the sociological literature are described as teacher 'survival strategies' (see Woods, 1983) - the kinds of skills teachers and other workers need to 'get by' in jobs, which have little personal meaning (often, in the case of teachers, a 'lost meaning') and over which they have little control.

We need to bear in mind here the idea of false consciousness discussed earlier. When we examine the work situation of any particular group of teachers matters are usually never clear cut. In a study by Menter et al's (1997) primary school teachers' responses to recent educational changes varied according to whether they originated in the 'public' or the 'private' selves of the individuals concerned. Those which derived from the former tended to be more positive about the changes than the latter, which were disclosed when teachers were speaking "confidentially about their private perceptions of changes" (p. 100). The tension between these two versions of the self was clearly the source of much stress. The positive and public account revolved around the idea of accountability, particularly in relation to parents, and the idea of consistency in provision across schools and LEAs, both of which were supported in principle by the teachers. However, as Menter et al (1997) suggest, "the negative aspects were presented by the teachers as an introduction of overburdening administration and a reduction and a waste of teaching time, which had led to a lowering of standards because topics were dealt with more superficially than before" (p. 110).
A key question here is whether to interpret the teachers’ accounts as an example of the inevitable strain experienced when adapting to a new role or as a reflection of increasing alienation and demoralisation. The strength of the false consciousness view of alienation, as stated above, is that it requires us to be cautious about expressions of satisfaction and to always look critically at the surface features of teacher consciousness. Menter et al themselves certainly seem to take account of this in the distinction they make between private and public versions of teachers’ responses. However, educational researchers cannot avoid taking up a value position here. The point is, would the ‘new’ self of teachers who became thoroughly socialised into the new role be a ‘better’ or ‘worse’ self from an educational viewpoint? It is clear that for several of these teachers the move away from ‘traditional child-centred and teaching-oriented professional identity’ (p. 115) towards the new collaborative, co-ordinating, managerialist professional identity, would not seem to represent an improvement. Had they used the term, they would clearly have seen this as an increase in alienation, and, in so far we held the same educational values as they did, we would probably have agreed with them. The new role seems to lessen autonomy and seems to be about contrived rather than genuine collaboration.

At the same time, however, our value position also requires us to make judgements even in situations, where no feelings of alienation are expressed either by the public or the private self, since it could be the case that both selves interpret and incorporate change in ways which result in less autonomy and more alienation. How could we make such judgements? Our analysis might perhaps deploy reference points grounded in the cultural expectations of those – maybe teachers in other schools in a contemporary or historical context – who had more experience of the quality of education that could be achieved in schools which were more democratic. Thus, it is not that the empirical world is ignored, but that the experience of others beyond those in the field of investigation are taken into account. Individual teachers will be positioned differently with respect to cultural ideals, but membership of a putative democratic society provides everyone with certain options and resources for the realisation of a new consciousness. Of course, the creation of a new consciousness is not the same as making explicit and bringing to the surface, as it were, what is already there. For many, awareness of alienation could follow from an acknowledgement of certain aspects of the self which had, for one reason or another, remained suppressed. It is a common place that there are many aspects of the self not always available to consciousness. It is not untypical for people to be surprised by their reactions to certain events and to subsequently acknowledge that they had discovered aspects themselves of which they were not previously aware.

However, although terms like alienation and false consciousness are difficult to define and apply, this should not weaken the assumption that how teachers feel about their work and how they accomplish their work
roles will contribute to the curriculum by conveying meanings about the nature of work to pupils. This implies that, to take two extreme, but relevant examples, the job satisfaction of the most outwardly satisfied teacher may be interpreted by pupils, as it may also be colleagues, as an expression of alienation, and this may be the truth of it; and, similarly, that the unhappy teacher may in his or her day-to-day relations with pupils paradoxically communicate a real sense of what non-alienated work means.

The Formal Curriculum

There are many aspects of the formal curriculum in schools which might be relevant here, but I want to focus on a development which directly addresses the theme of work, namely the so called work-related curriculum. For the purpose of our discussion here, I want to concentrate on two areas – first knowledge and understanding of the world of work, particularly work defined as paid employment, and, secondly, the acquisition of core skills which are thought to be important for all workers in present day society.

Understanding the world of work. In recent years there has been a growing consensus about the need to construct a work-related curriculum as an integral aspect of the formal curriculum (see Saunders et al, 1997). Properly contextualised, rather than merely ‘bolted on’, it would interact with the general curriculum in a way that was mutually enhancing and enriching. One of the clearest statements of this view is that of Spours & Young (1988). In arguing for VAAL (Vocational Aspects of Academic Learning), the authors propose that the demands of working life be regarded as a new educational principle and that from 14+ ‘work’ should move to the centre of the curriculum and be integrated with and informed by the academic curriculum. Although they recognise that work can be defined in various ways, they consider that “the concept of work cannot escape being about future employment and preparation for it” (p. 9). Consequently, they envisage the application of academic subjects to the study of work mainly in the paid employment sense of the term. Such an application would facilitate the progressive development of academic subjects through a “dialogue with productive life” (p. 5) and bring to the study of work the morally informed, systematic enquiry and bodies of knowledge associated with subject disciplines.

This approach to the work-related curriculum is open to criticism on a number of counts. For instance, it focuses on paid work and the 14+ age group to the exclusion of other forms of work and younger age groups. This may be justified on the grounds that it is the best place to start given current understandings of the meaning of work and expectations of both pupils and teachers, as well as interested third parties like parents and employers. However, the main problem is that it does not sufficiently problematise the notion of the ‘academic curriculum’ with which the work-related curriculum is supposed to be integrated. In advocating a
dialogue between the academic disciplines and productive life, the power of existing subject disciplines to alienate pupils seems to be under-estimated. With the central subject pillars of the National Curriculum intact, there is every danger that a vocationalist initiative of this nature would lead to the cart being put before the horse. Whilst the ostensible aim would be to teach about work and foster a critical disposition towards paid employment, the real aim of subject teachers might merely be to incorporate this new theme into the existing set up, rather than use it as a spur for genuine dialogue.

The capacity of the subject-based curriculum to impede genuine dialogue and subvert the aims of the work-related curriculum has been demonstrated in several studies.

A pertinent historical example would be the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), which though it preceded the Education Reform Act (1988) and the establishment of a National Curriculum, encountered various forms of resistance emanating from the subject specialists of the traditional curriculum. Studies (see, for example, Dale et al, 1990) have shown that responses to TVEI were various, but there were certain general tendencies:

(a) High status subjects like science and maths often did not become involved.
(b) The focus of new courses was often on the ‘less able’, thus limiting the impact of change and reinforcing class reproduction.
(c) Traditional subject teachers often resisted new courses which attempted to break down the barriers between subjects, e.g. a Creative Arts course which attempted to integrate Drama, Art, Music and Home Economics.
(d) In general, the initiative did not remove the distinction between high status and low status subjects.

In a recent assessment of the impact of the work-related curriculum on young people’s conceptual understanding of work, Saunders et al (1997) note that the use of ‘real-life’ contexts e.g. work experience placements have not realised their potential because they have been divorced from the main curriculum framework; and that despite the intentions of the National Curriculum Council (NCC, 1991) and others to incorporate Economic and Industrial Understanding as a cross-curricular theme within the National Curriculum, there has been little to show for it. Subject specialists themselves have been unwilling and often unable, because of syllabus and exam constraints, to alter their practices in ways which can accommodate new content and the new experiential approach to learning which goes with it. As recent research findings have shown (Whitty et al, 1994) whilst there is support amongst teachers for cross-curricular issues at the level of rhetoric, in practice the subject culture of the National Curriculum is still dominant. Between 14 and 16 there have been some changes as a result of the introduction of so-called ‘vocational’ options, but the direction taken has been defined almost exclusively in terms of the development of ‘skills’ rather than education in a broader sense. Such
reforms as there have been as well as those anticipated by the Dearing (1996) proposals are of the ‘bolt on’ variety and do not involve a complete rethink of the National Curriculum.

Key skills and general education. As Saunders et al (1997) point out, the aim to foster ‘key skills’ is associated with the idea of education for adult life, as well as skills specifically for work. In some ways, what is being proposed is an extension of the approach discussed in the previous section and represents an attempt to alter both the formal and informal curriculum through the introduction of an alternative content and methodology. A broader definition of work, to include ‘social and life skills’ rather than just skills for paid employment, is being deployed here. From a democratic educational perspective, the hope might be that such skills would play a role in the reconstruction of work, whether paid or unpaid, and its transformation into an activity informed by an alternative work ethic. If students learn that ‘good’ work involved the use and development of such skills, their expectations would be raised and they would be critical of jobs where there was no opportunity for such development.

The idea of ‘core skills’ or ‘key skills’ as they are now called in official discourse (see Dearing, 1996) have become central to policy debates in the area of post-16 education and training (Green, 1997). Although different bodies like the FEU, the CBI and the QCA (formerly SCAA/NVCOQ) have produced different definitions, there has been common agreement about the possibility and desirability of identifying skills or competences in certain key areas, such as literacy, numeracy, IT and problem solving – all essential requisites for flexible adaptation and functional efficiency in a rapidly changing economy and society. Such bodies have been supported by those who want to reform the current A level exam to encourage more breadth and balance in the academic curriculum (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1981; FEU, 1990); by supporters of competence-based vocational education as a means of achieving transferability (Jessop, 1990) and by those concerned with a unified post-16 curriculum as a way of bridging the vocational-academic divide (Spours, 1995).

In the light of our concern for an autonomy-enhancing curriculum, it is important to note that most proposals for key skills include a ‘personal effectiveness’ or ‘personal skills’ element. In 1989, the CBI produced a document Towards a Skills Revolution which referred to ‘effective communication’, and personal and interpersonal skills. In the same year, John MacGregor, the then Secretary of State for Education, asked SEAC, NCC, NCVQ and FEU to define core skills in six key areas, one of which was ‘personal skills’. These skills – which would include improving one’s own learning and working with others – are amongst the mandatory units of GNVQ (see below). Indeed, some commentators have seen the notion of personal effectiveness and personal autonomy as a theme in post-16 education which has of all key skills the greatest potential for integrating the vocational and the academic curriculum (Hodkinson, 1989).
Critique: the case of GNVQ

In evaluating the key skills approach, the rhetoric of personal effectiveness and personal skills is a good place to start, and a pertinent example is the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ). The overall aim of the GNVQ is to provide a high quality, school or college-based vocational alternative to the traditional academic route of GCSE through to A level. It was conceived in response to misgivings about National Vocational Qualifications, particularly the latter’s association with a narrow and over-specific range of job related skills. The GNVQ at advanced level is supposed to be roughly equivalent to two A level passes, whilst at the intermediate level the aim is to provide a qualification equivalent to four GCSE pass grades A – C. At intermediate and advanced levels four types of unit are involved – Mandatory, Optional, Core and Additional, the first two of these representing the knowledge, as well as the skills considered by employers and professionals to be essential for entry to and performance in an occupational area, e.g. Health and Social Care, Leisure and Tourism, Business, Art and Design. Although NVQ and GNVQ share the same competence-based framework, GNVQ’s are broader based with a more flexible structure and a greater emphasis self-directed learning techniques which enable students to demonstrate their abilities over a period of time and, to some extent, to work at their own pace. Students are encouraged to gather evidence for portfolios and to plan their own work, and are provided with scope for self-evaluation.

At the level of rhetoric there is certainly an emphasis on the development of the student as a self-regulated, autonomous learner (see NCVQ, 1995), but in practice the various constraints – a demanding assessment schedule, an excess of paperwork, the large amount of course work, outcomes, which are still too specific and prescriptive, a jargon-ridden language of assessment (Spours, 1995) – minimise the possibilities for the exploratory and reflective approach to learning one would expect of the autonomous learner. Students are not, in fact, treated as if they were effective individuals pursuing their own goals (FEU, 1994), but more as deferential workers who can follow instructions, carry out routines in an efficient and orderly way and conform to laid down procedures for problem solving (Spours, 1997). Moreover, although students are often asked to display “confidence in analysis, understanding and creativity” (see OFSTED, 1994, p. 18), there is no scope for this to go beyond the parameters of the employer-dominated discourse. Consider the following example of a student’s work which is cited by the inspectors as an example of good practice:

Jane’s Advanced Business portfolio addressed the full range of these skills and understanding in a report produced for a local building company. Her assignment was to act as a systems analyst making proposals to the company about how they could improve their
competitiveness through the use of computer and IT systems. She was asked to consider the company’s operational and financial efficiency. Her report was presented exceptionally well but behind this was evidence of detailed and careful analysis of how, for example, the company’s payroll system could be more efficient if it use an IT based programme. Jane based her judgements on clear and comprehensive knowledge of the company and had tested out all the stages of the proposal. The assignment had been well designed and well matched to the time available, the scale of operation in the company – and the ability of the student. It had also grown out of a good level of respect and cooperation between school, student and company that encouraged high expectations, which were fully realised. (pp. 18-19)

Whilst no doubt various skills and qualities were displayed here, this example gives cause for concern from an educational viewpoint. Clearly, there are values underpinning this activity (e.g. efficiency, competitiveness), but there is no evidence that the student has reflected upon these. Systems analysis can be carried out from a variety of perspectives, but the student does not seem to have been encouraged to think about different approaches or to think critically about the particular model she is using. The use of IT shows the danger of treating this as a ‘core skill’ as opposed to a cross-course theme which needs to be known and understood in a broader and more interconnective way. How did the application of IT affect the way work was structured? How did it affect the experience of doing work? If it didn’t involve de-skilling and job losses, as so many applications of IT have done, what were the social and economic consequences of applying it in this particular instance?

An Alternative Perspective

The fate of GNVQ is still in the balance, but it seems clear that at root the problem here is that the skills – or competency-based approach to teaching for autonomy and self-regulation will just not do. It is based on a view of the self which is ‘thin’ relative to the kind of reflexive, critical and creative agent which, I have argued, is the ideal self of ‘new times’. Similar points could be made about most other key skills. In relation to the goal of bridging the academic divide, they seem to add up to a programme of training which cannot deliver a coherent set of aims and objectives for a unified curriculum or serve as a common core, which would provide learners with a broad and balanced education.

So what is the alternative? In the view of one influential commentator, what is required is a well thought out programme of continuing general education, similar to that taught on many vocational courses in other European countries and Japan. For Green (1997, p. 19) “the core skills paradigm represents an impoverished form of general education which is neither delivering minimum basic skills ... nor even attempting to impart a foundation of scientific and humanistic culture adequate to the demands of active citizenship in modern societies”. The
solution is for all post-16 courses to have a mandatory minimum core curriculum of general education which should include:

- at the least, English/communications; mathematics/numeracy; and
- some form of civic or citizenship education which would have as its aim the cultivation of political literacy, environmental awareness, international understanding and social responsibility. Ideally, it would also include a science and a foreign language. (p. 20)

These would be constructed as modules which would provide a common core across the different vocational pathways, and would assist the process of transfer and progression.

Green's proposals have a number of strengths. Unlike Spours & Young's approach, his proposals for a general education go beyond the traditional subject curriculum and, if taken up as a common curriculum in schools, would in effect be an alternative to the present National Curriculum. Does this approach really bridge the vocational–academic divide? Yes, potentially, but it depends on how courses are taught and whether the content of general education courses is appropriate. The pathways he refers to reflect different career trajectories either with respect to content, e.g. engineering, languages, business studies, or form, e.g. the university route, further education, on the job training, etc., but unless steps are taken to integrate the different components, these pathways could easily be viewed as the main vocational and career element, thus leaving general education as high, dry and disconnected as liberal education always has been in a training context. Whilst the omission of areas like personal effectiveness and life and social skills is certainly justified in view of the impoverished view of the self and the restricted model of learning they have usually entailed, the baby does seem to have been thrown out with the bath water. Self-reflexivity and personal relationships - the social psychology of the individual learner - move out of focus as specific topics in Green's model. It is precisely these themes, I would argue, which if properly addressed, would provide the greatest scope for integrating different parts of the curriculum in all phases of a person's career and for developing a pedagogy which involved connecting with the priorities and concerns of individuals.

**Concluding Comments**

The Puritan work ethic and a work ethic for 'new times' have in common the imperative to recognise work as an expression of people's identities as moral beings, but the latter will be different in at least two important ways. First, a person today is likely to have more than one 'calling' in their working life either currently or more typically over the whole period of their active life. Thus, they would have to be flexible and adaptable in terms of practical and intellectual skills, but more importantly, I would argue, they would have to develop their capacity for transferring commitment from one job to another and also, at a deeper level, to
become more aware of the various problems and dilemmas intrinsic to the process of becoming morally committed, e.g. the renewal of trust, the transfer of loyalty, the need for a period of adjustment.

Secondly, they would have to become more critically aware, both in relation to their own self projects and the needs of society generally, of a wider range of issues and dilemmas derived from the experience of living in “new times”. A series of questions would need to be generated. Is the job worth doing? Is it socially necessary? Would I do it if I didn’t have to do it? Is it damaging to the social and material environment? Is it culturally enriching? Do I have any control over it, i.e. over what is produced and over the production process? What does this job create in the way of social relationships between myself and others in the workplace? Am I exploiting others and/or being exploited by them? Do I see others as competitors? What is the job doing for me personally? Is it improving me? Is it making me a better person? Is it helping me to develop my talents? Is it giving me an identity I can live with?

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References


