Reframing Learning: Performance, Identity and Practice

URL for this paper:
http://www.re-skill.org.uk/papers/Reframing_Learning_Holmes00.pdf

Leonard Holmes

email: l.holmes@re-skill.org.uk

Presented at *Critical Contributions to Managing and Learning: 2nd Connecting Learning and Critique Conference*, University of Lancaster, June 2000

Introduction

> 'Few can seriously doubt that learning has come of age. Over the past 20 years or so, it
> has moved centre stage and shows no sign of being sidelined."
> (Honey, 1998: 28)

Within current UK economic and social policy discourse in respect of education and training,
learning is presented as the route to success, for individuals, for organizations, for
communities and nations, fuelling endogenous economic growth and promoting social
inclusion (Ball, 1996; Kennedy, 1997; DfEE, 1998). So, it is argued, individuals must
become lifelong learners, firms must become learning organisations, the nation must become
a learning society. Such imperatives are the topics of a burgeoning literature, particularly texts
which summarise, comment on and engage with other texts (eg see Jarvis et al., 1998;
Ranson, 1998; Knapper and Cropley, 2000).

A decade or so earlier, the emphasis had been on 'competence'. The purported low level of
competence of the British workforce was impeding the competitiveness of the UK economy
(IMS, 1984). The educational system was viewed as being riven with undesirable traditions
and practices, particularly in terms of a status divide between academic and vocational,
reflecting in many ways the class structure; a greater emphasis on and valuing of practical
ability was needed (CPRS, 1980; MSC, 1981). Vocational qualifications were 'reformed' such
that national criteria would apply to a new form of qualification which would thus be a
'statement of competence' (de Ville, 1986; NCVQ, 1989). Individuals would gain such a
qualification by practically demonstrating their competence rather than 'merely' by tests of
knowledge. Variations on the notion of 'competence', such as 'capability', 'transferable skills',
and 'key skills' were adopted within initiatives for promoting change in higher education
(Barnett, 1994; Edwards and Knight, 1995).

Such emphasis upon competence and cognates has now become incorporated within the
discourse of learning, with 'competence' ('skill', 'capability' etc) often being referred to
'learning outcomes' (Jessup, 1991; Otter, 1991; Burke, 1995). Where previously the processes
by which such outcomes are to be achieved would be referred to as 'education', 'teaching',
and/or 'training' (or 'training and development'), the notion of learning *as a process* is being
used. The practice of teaching or training is increasingly talked of as 'learning facilitation';
students, trainees, etc are now referred to as 'learners'; 'teaching methods' have become
'learning methods'; and so on.

This emphasis upon the purported *process* of learning, and its *outcomes* (especially
understood as practical *competence*) lies at the heart of various interventions by the state, by
managers of educational institutions, by senior managements of work organisations, by
practitioners of education and training. If the concern is with competence, what people can
do, then effort would be well-placed in seeking to identify and specify what constitutes
competence, so that its achievement may be assessed efficiently and effectively. Moreover,
since competence is the outcome of the *process* of learning, an emphasis should be placed on
 learning *per se*, rather than with teaching/ training; a better understanding of the process of
learning would enable more effective and efficient achievement of the desired outcomes. In
particular, the ability of the 'learner' to manage her/ his own learning (having 'learned to

learn'), and to learn '*naturally*', through experience and reflection (Kolb, 1984), would allow for the informal and incidental learning that arises in workplace and other locations, rather than in settings for formal education and training (Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Boud and Garrick, 1999).

The assumption in all this is that learning *is* an identifiable process *sui generis,* and that learning outcomes are *fixed*, so as to objectively measurable. Moreover, the *location* of the purported process of learning, and of its outcomes, is *internal* to the *individual* (and, by extension and analogy, to other *entities* such as organisations, communities, cities, society). By contrast, the validation that learning is taking place and has taken place is to be located in the 'external world'. The 'concrete reality' of the external world is the basis for 'experience' and the place in which new learning is 'tested out' through 'experimentation' (Kolb, 1984); competence may be assessed by means of the 'evidence of performance', real-life practical activity rather than tests of knowledge and understanding in 'unreal' examination rooms.

Clearly such assumptions are based in an 'entitative' (Hosking and Morley, 1991) understanding of the nature of social reality , what Sampson (1988) terms 'possessive individualism'. They retain the Cartesian duality of a separate inner and external nature, the mind and the world. Learning takes place, happens, occurs *within* the individual, and does not necessarily require the engagement and involvement of any other individual. The outcome is some change of *state* within the individual, an internal attribute in the form of a disposition to act in a certain way rather than another way; this disposition may be referred to as competence, capability, ability, skill, know-how or whatever.

This paper takes issue with such assumptions about learning and competence. It will argue that these are based on confusions over the meaning of the terminology used in respect of learning. By engaging in analysis of the concepts of learning and competence, it will be argued, we can gain a better understanding of their meaning in use, particularly in respect of their connection with the notion of performance. Performance will be shown to be a situated interpretation/ construction of activity or behaviour, implicating issues that may be addressed through the concepts of social practices and of emergent identity. Moreover, where attributions of learning and of competence are socially consequential, as is the case in educational and work-related contexts, they primarily concern the warrantability of anticipations of future performance. As such, their meaning, ie the criteria and/ or symptoms (Wittgenstein, 1958: 24ff) by which we may understand such attributions, lies primarily in the relational processes by which such meaning is socially constructed.

The Meanings of 'Learning'

Andreski warns us that
> 'constant attention to the meaning of terms is indispensable in the study of human
> affairs, because in this field powerful social forces operate which continuously create
> verbal confusion..."
> Andreski, 1972: 61)

Clearly the term 'learning' is used in a variety of modes of discourse and the contexts for these. In particular, we may note the following contexts:

(a)   mundane, everyday interaction and conversation;

(b)   the arena of education and training;

(c)   professional and academic psychology;

(d)   the management employees within work organisations;

(e)   the management of such organisations themselves;

(f)   the political-economic arena.

To *assume* that the term 'learning' is used synonymously in each mode of discourse is to render us liable to a fallacy identified as long ago as Aristotle. Flew (1979) uses the term 'systematic ambiguity' for

> "words or expressions that may always have the same meaning when applied to one kind of thing, but have a different meaning when applied to another kind of thing."
> (Flew, 1979: 11).

Given the variety of contexts of its use, the term 'learning' is a prime candidate for possible systematic ambiguity, and we must beware of the fallacy of assuming that it has the same meaning when applied to individual persons and to various collectivities such as organisations and societies[1]. Rather we should engage in sound conceptual analysis of the term 'learning' in order to avoid what Wittgenstein warns us as the 'bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 109).

Of course, in ordinary mundane discourse we have no real problem with the term 'learning' and of associated terms such as 'competence', 'skill' and so on. Problems only occur when, as with Augustine's difficulty with 'time', we try to *explain* such terms; more problematic is when we try to act on our attempts to explain. Thus, when we speak of 'learning outcomes', or express these as 'competences', 'skills', 'capabilities' and so on, this superficially seems to suggest that we are *reporting the existence of some state of affairs* concerning that *individual*, some *dispositional quality* or *attribute*. As 'outcomes of learning' these appear to be statements based on the use of the past tense of the verb 'to learn'. So when we talk about someone 'learning' (in the present, ie using the present tense of 'to learn'), there appears to be the implied assumption that some *event* or *occurrence* is taking place. It may therefore seem sensible to attempt to analyse such purported *states of affairs* of individual and such *events*, as part of any enquiry into learning. However, that would be to take as valid the assumption that such are the *meanings* of the various forms of term 'learn'.

In his attack on the Cartesian doctrine of two substances, corporeal and mental, body and mind, Ryle (1949) gives dispositions and to particular attention. Dispositions, in Ryle's analysis, rather than being regarded as 'descriptions of occult causes'(of behaviour), such terms should be taken as *semi-hypotheticals*, ie statements about how someone would be expected to behave, under certain sorts of conditions. To say of someone that 'he knows French' is to say

> 'that if, for example, he is ever addressed in French, or shown any French newspaper, he responds pertinently in French, acts appropriately or translates it accurately into his own tongue."
> (Ryle, 1949: 119)

Dispositional statement as law-like, which may be true of false, but not in the same way as statements of fact to which they may be applied. Their job is different, argues Ryle, to act as what he terms an inference-ticket[2], licensing the move from asserting factual statements to asserting other factual statements:

> 'They apply to, or they are satisfied by, the actions, reactions and states of the object [a thing or a person];to predict, retrodict, explain, and modify these actions, reactions,

and states."
(op. cit.: 119)

Since the use of the past tense of the verb 'to learn' normally carries the same meaning as words such as 'can', 'knows', 'understands', and so on (excepting the examples above, which are not significant for our purposes here), we must treat it as a dispositional word. As such, its function is in the construction of hypothetical and semi-hypothetical statements, rather than in the reporting of some occurrence. That is, to say that someone has learnt something, or has learnt to do something, or to say that they are able (to), capable (of), competent (at) is to make an inference claim which is used to explain, retrodict or predict performance. The use of past tense of 'to learn', or the term 'competent' and cognates, does not normally describe the execution in the past of some identifiable activity called 'learning'.

Similarly, we may analyse present-tense usage of the verb to learn, through Ryle's arguments that there is an important class of occurrence or episodic words which, because they are active verbs, have tended to make us oblivious to their logic. These are, he argues, *success* or *achievement* verbs; the examples he gives are 'win', 'unearth', 'find', 'cure', 'convince', 'prove', 'cheat', 'unlock', 'safeguard', 'conceal'. These correspond with *task* verbs, with the force of 'trying to'. Sometimes we use an achievement verb as a synonym for a task verb (or verbal phrase):

> " 'Hear' is sometimes used as a synonym of 'listen' and 'mend' as a synonym of 'try to mend'."
> (op. cit., p. 143)

A major difference between the logical force of a task verb and its corresponding achievement verb is that, in using the latter,

> 'we are asserting that some state of affairs obtains over and above that which consists in the performance, if any, of the subservient task activity."
> (ibid.)

Thus, for a doctor to cure a patient, she must both treat the patient and the patient must be well again. Ryle notes that there may be achievements without a task performance: for example, success may also be ascribed to luck. In addition, we may use a success verb *in anticipation*, with the possibility that we will revise the usage in the event of failure (p.144)

The English language has a range of task verbs and verbal phrases associated with learning. In educational settings we say we are 'studying' a subject[3]. Other terms include 'exploring', 'practising', 'researching', 'trying to', 'having a go at', 'working at', 'looking into', 'reading up on', and the like. There are also *passive* formulations: 'being taught', 'being shown', 'receiving instruction'[4]. Such task verbs and verbal phrases carry no necessity, in their meaning, that success has been achieved: 'She practised the flute every day but she still can't play a single tune', 'He studied biology at school, but failed the exam'.

It is important to note that the use of both a task verb and a success verb together does not describe two different activities:

> 'When a person is described as having fought and won, or as having journeyed and arrived, he is not being said to have done two things, but to have done one thing with a certain upshot. Similarly a person who has aimed and missed has not followed up one occupation by another; he has done one thing, which was a failure."
> (ibid.)

5

As Ryle says, success verbs belong, put crudely, 'not to the vocabulary of the player, but to the vocabulary of the referee' (p.145). So too, we may argue, with learning. An undergraduate studying industrial sociology and learning about Braverman's deskilling thesis is not doing two separate things, but one thing (studying) successfully. To say she has learnt is to say she has studied successfully. We can also apply this to teaching (demonstrating, explaining, telling, etc) and the now-fashionable notion of 'facilitating learning'. The use of the latter is as a phrase to indicate success in teaching; it is neither the same as teaching (which may be unsuccessful) nor a separate, superior activity.

The nature of performance

From the application of Ryle's mode of analysis to the usage of the term 'learn', it is clear that we have to consider how the term is used in relation to statements which, as Ryle puts it, 'predict, retrodict, explain' a person's conduct or behaviour, ie what they do, will do, or have done. This would seem to locate Ryle's philosophical position in consonance with the Watsonian behaviourist stance in the science of psychology, a position which Ryle himself seems to suggest. However, there is a further step which now needs to be taken in the analysis, that of gaining a proper understanding of the nature of performance.

In most scientific psychology, particularly in the behaviourist and cognitivist traditions, it is assumed that behaviour is objectively observable, at least in principle. However, whilst this may be appropriate in the context of psychological experiments on animal behaviour[5], it is not so with respect to socially significant human behaviour, where issues of the *meaning* of behaviour is of vital importance. As Blumer points out,

> 'To ignore the meaning of the things towards which people act is seen as falsifying the behaviour under study. To bypass the meaning in favour of factors alleged to produce the behaviour is seen as grievous neglect of the role of meaning in the formation of behaviour."
> (Blumer, 1969: p.3)

Harré and Secord (1972) seek to develop a mode of analysis of human behaviour through distinguishing between *movements*, *actions*, and *acts*. Bodily movement may arise through causal sequences, eg the movement of a person's arm may be a reaction to being prodded by a sharp implement, or the symptom of some physiological disorder such as Tourette's syndrome. It may, on the other hand, be intentional *action*. However, even the recognition or assumption of intentional action may be insufficient for full understanding of the behaviour, for we also need to understand what *act* or *acts* the person intended to accomplish by such action. There is no one-to-one correspondence between movement or ('mere') behaviour, actions, and acts, for the same action may bring off different acts (eg raising one's arm may be an ettmpt to hail a taxi, wave farewell to a friend, make a bid at an auction, and so on). Moreover, the same act may be be brought off by different actions (eg bidding may be accomplished by raising an arm, a nod of a head, continued eye contact with the auctioneer, and so on).

Using the term 'performance', as is now commonplace in the discourse of competence, for *acts* in the Harré and Secord analysis, and the term 'activity' to refer to *actions* (or movement-action sequences), we might illustrate the analysis by the model in figure 1.

Activity ⟶ Interpretation ⟶ Performance
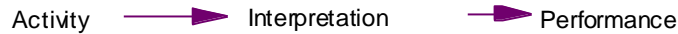
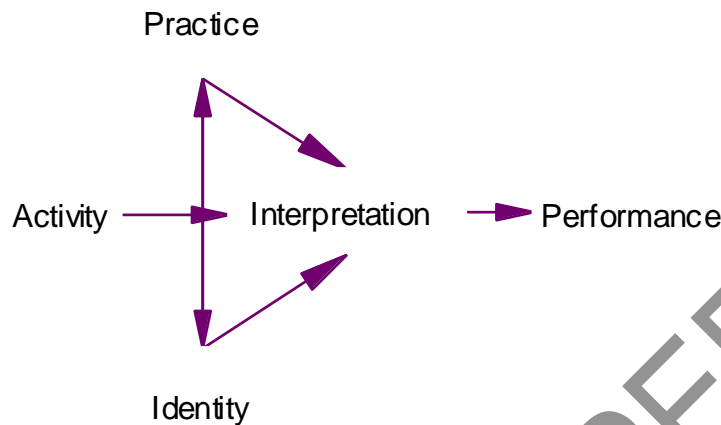**Figure 1: Interpretation of Activity as Performance**

That is, activity must be *interpreted* or *construed* as performance of a particular kind in order for it to have meaning in the social world.

The question which we may now pose is that of *how* this process of interpretation/ construal is made: what conditions are necessary for an instance of situated activity to be taken as performance-of-a-kind. Two components would seem to be critical. First, there is deemed to exist a set of *practices* appropriate to the situation, such that the activity may be viewed as an instantiation of a practice from that set. Second, the person whose activity is being so construed/ interpreted is deemed to be a certain sort-of-person, to have an *identity* appropriate to such a performance. Of course, these elements are not completely self-contained and separate, for the attribution of an identity to someone implicates some understanding of the practices they are likely to engage in, and practices are associated with particular identities.

These two elements may be noted, under various terms, in a variety of theoretical literature concerning how human beings make sense of each others' behaviour. The notion of practices may be related to that of 'stocks of knowledge' and 'interpretive schemes (Schutz, 1932/ 1972), 'typificatory schemes' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966); 'recurrent and constant meanings' used in the production of joint action (Blumer, 1969), 'rules' (Harré and Secord, 1972). The notion of identity may be related to that of 'role' which was a key term within much of the symbolic interactionism literature. Garfinkel's 'breaching studies' (Garfinkel, 1967) may be understood in terms of the manner in which other actors attempt to make sense of a situation in which an individual is acting differently from that expected of someone in the assumed role or identity.

The diagram presented in figure 1 might therefore be elaborated as in figure 2.

Combining the analysis based on Ryle with that based on Harré and Secord, we can thus say that the attribution that someone has learned is made on the basis of interpretation of situated activity as performance, drawing upon a set of practices and a set of identities appropriate to the situation. Past activity is interpreted as performance-of-a-kind, the instantiation of a particular practice or combination of practices appropriate to the situation, by someone who may be identified as having an appropriate identity to perform in such a manner; and the now-constructed fact that they have so performed warrants the 'prediction' that they would perform in like fashion on future occasions.

7

Figure 2: Practice-Identity Model of Interpretation of Activity as Performance

'Prediction', anticipation and confidence

The foregoing analysis shows us that performance is socially constructed, based on interpretation of activity as instantiation of social practice by a person-of-a-certain-sort (ie 'with' a certain identity). Because attributions of learning and competence are made in relation to such interpretations of activity as performance-of-a-kind, these too must be treated as socially constructed. Such an analysis is convivial with recent social theorising of learning, particularly the legitimate peripheral participation model (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). However, this analysis might still be acceptable to many proponents of the competence approach and the 'learning agenda' (eg Honey, 1998). Thus the occupational standards on which National Vocational Qualifications in the UK are based, and similar work in other countries, might be presented as attempts to elaborate the social practices appropriate to particular arenas or 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Notions of 'key skills' and 'personal competence' might be taken as expressions of the characteristics of relevant identity. Indeed, Boyatzis' (1982) approach to managerial competency appears to combine elements. It may still be possible to regard attributions of learning and competence as having stable meaning in respect of their correspondence with some objectively observable reality.

However, this would be to ignore the social processes by which such interpretations, construals, attributions and anticipations are made, and the social salience these have in respect of the degree to which other social actors are willing to commit themselves to the consequences which may arise. This is particularly important in respect of the arenas of education and of training and development, where the *attribution* that someone has learnt ie is competent, has skill and knowledge etc, is the 'inference-licence' for 'predictions' of future

performance. Such predictions warrant the decisions to allow them to progress within a programme, be awarded a qualification, be selected for employment, to promote (or demote) them, and so on.

We must be clear here that 'prediction' is meant in a soft sense, that is 'anticipation', rather than as certain expectation. To say someone *has learnt*, *is (or has) competence*, in the context of making such decisions is to *warrant the anticipation* of future performance. Now such decisions are not taken in some extra-social context, but are taken in a socially structured, institutionalised setting. They are usually made not merely as a matter between the person making the decision and the individual concerned. A variety of persons may be involved in the selection decision for employment, and this is certainly so in the case of decisions regarding progression and award of qualifications in an educational setting. Each of these various persons will wish, or may be required (or may anticipate being required), to present their decisions as being based on what are taken as adequate grounds; such presentation will have a variety of audiences. Furthermore, those who rely upon or are affected by such decisions will require some means of understanding how the decisions were warranted in respect of their own concerns. Immediate supervisors of employees selected on the basis of attributed competence, representatives of qualifications awarding bodies, teachers on the subsequent parts of a course, managers of educational institutions, and a host of other parties share a common concern that future performance will be as desired.

However, future performance is essentially unknowable, given that it lies in the future. We may talk of predicting the future, but prior to events unfolding to provide confirmation or disconfirmation, predictions are merely anticipations of the future which we make with a certain degree of confidence. The basis for decisions regarding selection for employment, progression within a course, award of a qualification etc, in so far as they concern future performance, may thus be seen as anticipations made *with a degree of confidence* (Holmes, 1994). Moreover, given the distributed nature of involvement with these decisions, such confidence will itself be distributed. Any system involving these various parties relies upon the achievement of a high level of confidence for its stability and continuation, no less than is the case for various other features of modern complex society[6]. Following Donaldson's depiction of the banking system (Donaldson and Farquhar, 1988), we might refer to the achievement and maintenance of confidence within the areas of concern here as a 'confidence trick' (Holmes, 1994).

The 'reality' of whether or not someone has learnt, or is competent and so on, is thus a matter of construction within a web or network of actors and of (socially constructed) systems, procedures, discourses, artifacts and so on (or 'actor-networks': cf Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987). The idea that competence may be objectively measured and certificated may be appealing to many seeking certainty for decisions about the deployment of employees and for promoting greater social inclusion based on meritocratic principles. However, it is illusory as may be demonstrated by the way that attributions of competence may be reversed, as in the case of the 'fall-from-grace' experienced by senior executives such as the former chairman of British Airways, and in the disproportionate difficulties experienced in seeking appropriate employment by many graduates from minority ethnic groups. Such problem areas suggest that 'higher level' occupations present an area for particular analysis of the social construction of learning and competence.

Relative importance of practice and identity

Whilst the interpretation/ construal of activity as performance-or-a-kind implicates issues of *both* practice and identity, these are not necessarily of equal importance in any particular situation. Here may consider the relative importance of each in relation to the type of situation in which activity-performance arises. First, we may consider situations in respect of their *degree of formality*. At one extreme, there are many social situations we encounter in ordinary, mundane, everyday life, in which the identity of the persons with whom we interact and the interpretation of their actions in terms of specific practices are of relatively little social consequence (eg causal conversation with a stranger, or someone we know slightly). At the other extreme, some situations are highly formal, situations we may refer to as ceremonials, rituals, rites and so on; for these it is important that the various actors involved has the appropriate identity and engage in actions which are deemed proper for the performance of the relevant practices (eg a wedding service). In between are situations which we might term 'semi-formal', in which identity and/ or 'correct' performance of practice may be important. The latter would include much of the everyday activity within educational and work settings. Using the notions of practice and of identity, we may construct a simplified grid as in figure 3, which locates different types of situations in terms of the four quadrants.
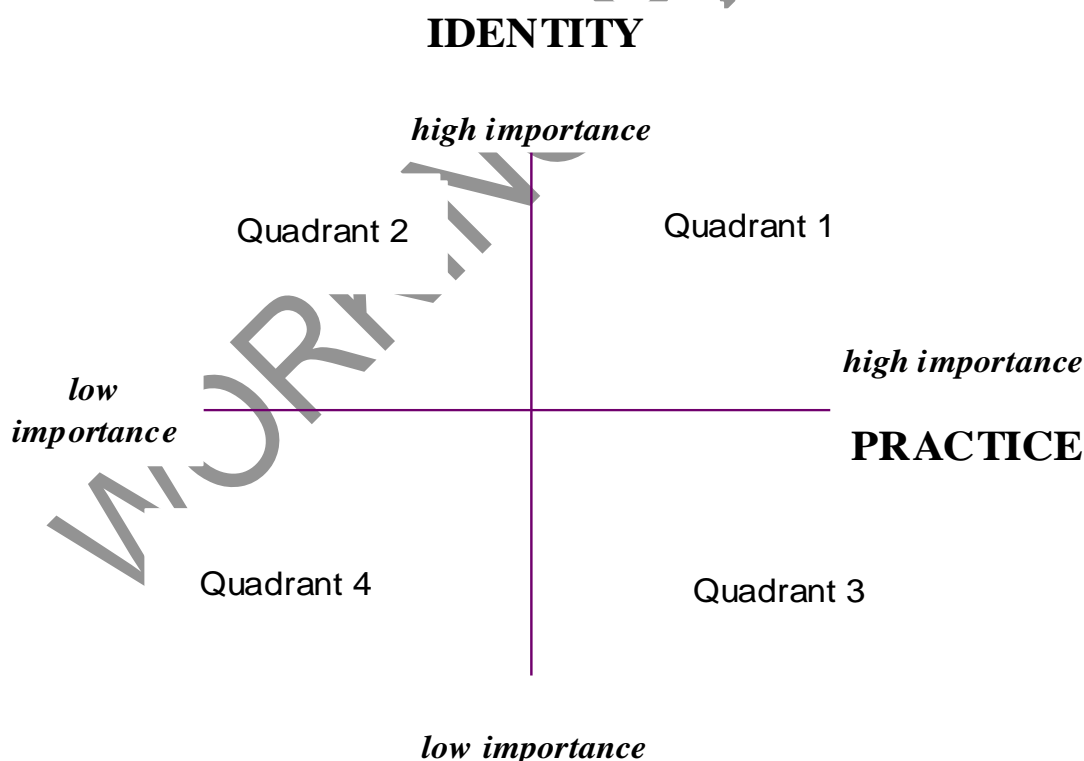

Figure 3: Practice vs Identity: Relative Importance

On this analysis, it is quadrants 2 and 3 that are of most interest in respect of educational and work situations. In some cases, it is important that the person whose activity is under interpretation or construal carries out such activity in such a way that it is clear that a certain practice of set of practices is being undertaken (quadrant 3). This may be required in order that others may understand what they themselves may or must now do, for the orderly continuation of the collaborative action that constitutes organisational work. Where it is unclear, the question '*what* are you doing?' may be posed to the individual with the expectation that an account would be given as to what practice is being engaged in.

In other cases, however, it may be the identity of the individual that must be determined (quadrant 2); the relevant question in cases of uncertainty would be 'who are you (to be doing that)?'. The difference between these different types of situations may be also be shown the type of answer that would serve as an acceptable account to the question 'why are you doing that?': a statement of what the activity/ performance is intended to achieve (practice related) or a reference to the required or expected actions of the kind-of-person the actor is or claims to be (identity related). Of course, most of the episodes of everyday life in educational and work settings take place without such questioning, such that the practices and/ or the identities of the participants are taken for granted. However, as Garfinkel's 'breaching' studies demonstrated, when the routines of everyday life are disrupted by activity which does not match the normally expected requirements of appropriate practices and/or identities, repair is necessary (Garfinkel, 1967).

The specification of the requirements for 'proper' performance of work practices has been a key feature of the modern era, promoted by Taylor (1911, 1967) and his followers, and analysed by Braverman (1974) drawing upon Marx and within the subsequent deskilling debate. A certain degree of success in such specification may be claimed in respect of the relationship between the physical characteristics of objects upon which work is done and the physiological characteristics of human beings undertaking such work. However, it is clear that much of human work performance lies outside such limited cases and is, rather, subject to *social* specification, ie relies upon normative judgements within social groupings. Moreover, the degree of discretion which the individual actor has, or is permitted, in interpreting how particular practices may be performed may vary significantly. In particular, the performance of the practices which constitute managerial and professional is marked by a high level of discretion. This is indexed, for example, by the extensive use of such terms as 'appropriate', 'relevant', and so on in the Management Charter Initiative's attempt to specify the 'occupational standards' for managerial occupations.

Taking such issues of *specifiability*, we may consider the relative importance of practice and of identity in the process of interpreting activity as performance-of-a-kind, ie as instantiation of a particular practice or set of practices. Where performance may be relatively highly specified in respect of activity, the interpretation will rely primarily upon the understanding of the practices deemed appropriate to the situation. Conversely, where performance is not amenable to a high level of specification, it is the *identity* of the person which is likely to be primary significance. This may be represented[7] as in figure 4

High

Relative importance

Identity

Practice

Low

Low   High

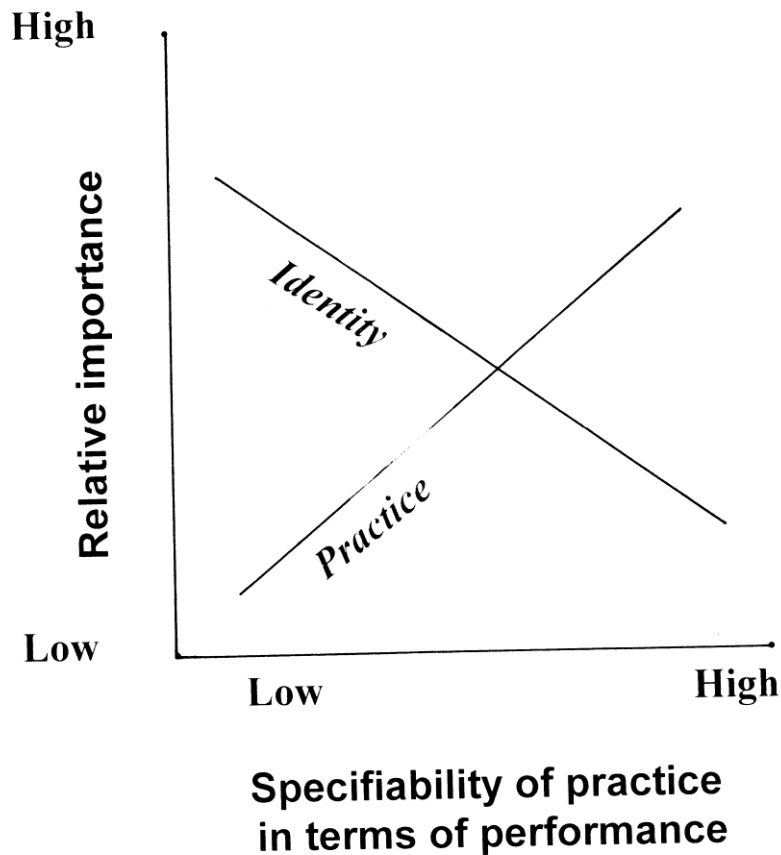## Specifiability of practice in terms of performance
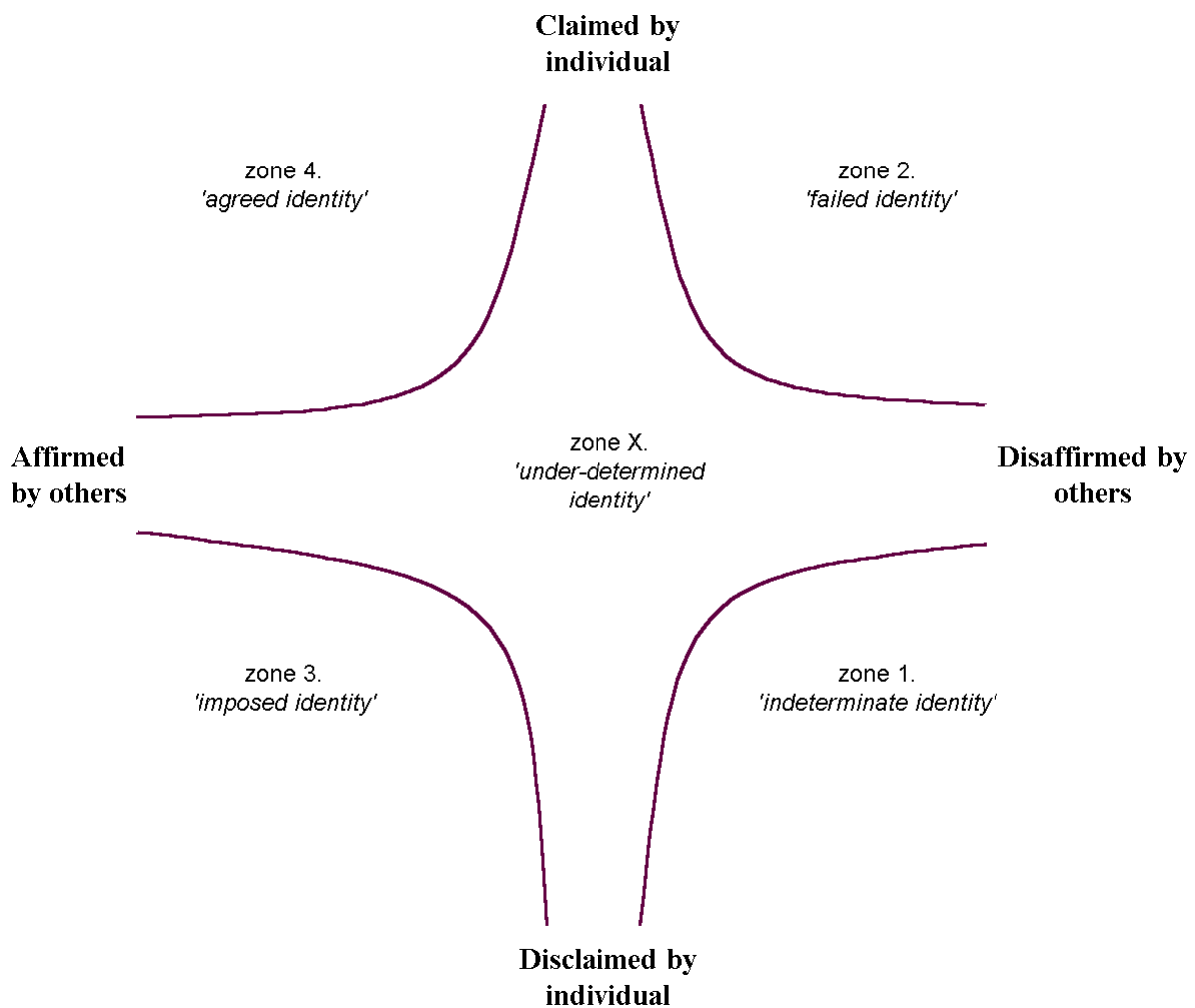
Figure 4

On this basis, the analysis of learning in respect of 'higher-level' occupations, including management, professions and generally those for which higher education is deemed appropriate, must take a special interest in issues of identity.

Emergent identity

The term 'identity' was glossed above by the phrase 'a certain sort-of-person', passing over the debates that have arisen in recent years concerning that term and others such as 'self' and 'subjectivity' (eg Henriques, et al, 1984; Taylor, 1989; Rose, 1990; Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1996; Jenkins, 1996; Craib, 1998; Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). The term 'identity' is here being used as a 'sensitizing concept' (Strauss, 1959; Denzin, 1978) to enable us to address the issues involved in examining how, in the 'definition of the situation' (Thomas, 1928), the interpretation of activity as performance implicates some understanding of who-a-person-is. Identity is thus to be taken non-essentially, as *relational* (Clegg, 1990), the emergent outcome of situated social processes of *identification*; identity is socially constructed and negotiated, always subject to possible contestation, fragile. Jenkins (1996) refers to 'the internal-external dialectic of identification'. To distinguish the concern here from notions of identity as *social ascription* or of identity as *self-concept*, the term 'emergent

identity' will be used.

Emergent identity may thus be viewed as arising from, or (as we might say) 'in', the interaction between the individual and significant others in respect of the kind of person the individual is to be taken to be in, and in relation to, the particular situation. The individual may seek to lay claim to an identity, and this claim may or may not match the ascriptions by others, ie the claim may be affirmed or disaffirmed. The ascriptions by others may be accepted by the individual, or may be resisted. Of course, as the process is one of negotiation, there may be intermediate positions in which the individual and/or the significant others may be ambivalent or equivocal in their judgements. For simplicity, we may regard the possible outcomes in terms of positions or 'zones' on a grid based on the dimensions of claim-disclaim and affirmation-disaffirmation, with the range of possible equivocal positions reduced to the central zone of 'indeterminate identity' (figure 5)[8].

Claimed by individual

zone 4.
'agreed identity'

zone 2.
'failed identity'

Affirmed by others

zone X.
'under-determined identity'

Disaffirmed by others

zone 3.
'imposed identity'

zone 1.
'indeterminate identity'

Disclaimed by individual

Figure 5 Claim-Affirmation model of emergent identity

13

The utility of this claim-affirmation model of emergent identity lies not so much in terms of the *positional locating* of a person's situated identity as in respect of the *identity trajectories* that may be undertaken. As an identity project (Harré, 1983), the aspiration of the individual is to move from zone 1 ('indeterminate identity') to zone 4 ('achieved identity'), but carries the risk (Goffman, 1961) that the identity claim will not be affirmed. Moreover, even a position of 'achieved identity' may be subject to contestation at some later stage. All positions must be seen as relationally produced; emergent identity is relational positioning and may be subject to relational *re*positioning. Furthermore, *other identity ascriptions* may come into play which the individual may seek to resist or disclaim; and as noted above, claims and ascriptions may be equivocal. There is thus a multitude of possible identity trajectories which may arise in the path to the *stabilised* position of 'achieved identity' or to, from and through any position.

Careers, particularly of managers, graduates, and others in 'higher-level' occupations may thus be examined in terms of such trajectories, particularly in respect of the ways that managers attempt to deal with disaffirmation or equivocal ascription in respect of their claim on the desired identity. In addition, studying the trajectories of those who seek but are unsuccessful in moving to the 'achieved identity' position would help illuminate the critical factors in play; for example, the case of members of minority ethnic groups experiencing difficulties in gaining entry to managerial position. Rather than treating these as either issues of discrimination (in effect, a counsel of despair) or matters of personal deficiency of, for example, competencies or style of self-presentation, the particular critical points within the trajectory may be established and examined to consider alternative courses of action (Holmes and Robinson, 1999).

Critical to such analyses is the consideration of how claim/ disclaim and affirmation/ disaffirmation is made. Recognising the semiotic, particularly discursive, role of these processes, we may draw upon the notions of *accounts* (Scott and Lyman, 1968) and *warrants* (Draper, 1988; Gergen, 1989), ie discursive modes of seeking legitimacy for actions undertaken. An individual's claim on an identity is more likely to be affirmed when it is presented in terms of such legitimated modes of discourse, or what Gergen (1989) calls 'conventions of warrant'. Similarly, identity ascriptions by certain actors are more likely to gain acceptance by others when expressed in such terms. Under different social conditions different conventions of warrant may arise. Moreover, given the network character of the social constructing of confidence outlines above, we should note that in any particular social setting there may be multiple conventions of warrant available[10]. In the contemporary scene, we may note that the vocabulary of competence, as an outcome of learning, is highly legitimised in the processes by which identity claims and ascriptions are warranted, particularly at the point of entry to occupations and organisational positions (Holmes, 2000). Qualifications may provide support for such warranting, albeit that certain qualifications may carry higher status than others[11]. Of course, in many cases, the determination of what qualifications are to be made available, and to whom, may come under the control of a particular group, eg a professional association, and/or may be subject to contestation.

14

Reframing Learning

The foregoing analysis has sought to extend the conceptual analysis of 'learning' by examination of the interpreted/ constructed nature of performance. Whether or not someone has learned (is competent, etc) is not amenable to objective assessment but is, rather, constructed through relational processes implicating, particularly in the case of 'higher-level' occupations, the warranting of claims and affirmations (or their contraries) of emergent identity. The search for learning *within* individuals (whether these are conceived in terms of the information processors of cognitive psychology or as the sovereign, monadic self-actualising persons of humanistic psychology) fails to take account of the thoroughly social nature of context in which the term learning is used and the phenomena in relation to which it has its meaning. The idea that learning is a process *sui generis* lacks 'ontological depth' (Bhaskar, 1979), unless transcendant and metaphysical notions, such as 'the mind' and hypothetical states (eg 'competence') are introduced. However, such manoevres prevent empirical investigation, rendering any interventionist programmes lacking the evidence base on which currently espoused policy directions are purportedly to be founded. The connection between the 'internal' realm of such purported states and the 'external' world of empirical observation remain unexplicated. Even if an explanation were to be given as to how such internal states gave rise to a person's bodily movement, there would still be a explanatory chasm between that and the socially consequential performance which is of prime concern. Such 'internalist' theorisations of learning thus lack ecological validity.

In contrast, a focus on the nature of performance as the situated constructed interpretation of activity yields a set of conceptual issues which generate empirically examinable concerns. The discursive and semiotic character of the practices which are taken to be appropriate to a particular arena affords a range of methods of empirical investigation. More especially in the case of 'higher level learning', the modes of warranting identity claims and ascriptions, particularly in critical moments of transition within an ongoing trajectory of emergent identity, provide a potentially rich site for empirical investigation and analysis. A research programme, based on such issues, has recently started at the University of North London, concerning employability amongst graduates who appear to have disproportionate difficulty in gaining appropriate employment, ie 'older' graduates (over the age of about 27 on graduation), those from minority ethnic groups, and those of working-class background (ACGAS, 1999; Berthoud, 1999; Purcell and Hogarth, 1999). Similar studies might be undertaken in respect of the difficulties experienced in entering managerial positions by women and persons from minority ethnic groups (Holmes and Robinson, 1999).

The contemporary emphasis upon learning and competence thus raises serious matters, both of theory and of practice, which expose the conceptual poverty of naïve realist ontological and epistemological assumptions of the internalist-entitative approach. Taking a relational-constructionist perspective (Hosking, Dachler and Gergen, 1995; Hosking and Bouwen, 2000) generates new insights and new modes of investigation. It extends the social theorisation of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) by demonstrating that the notion of 'performance' cannot be taken as the conceptual 'anchor' (Holmes, 2000) for establishing the facticity of learning and competence. Performance is itself socially constructed through the relational processes involved in warranting claims and affirmations

that situated activity is the instantiation of social practices by persons whose emergent identity is appropriate to the situation. Learning is inescapably social, and its sociality provides the basis the reframing of both empirical investigation of interventionist programmes intended to accomplish the desiderata of contemporary social and economic policy presented under the rubric of 'lifelong learning' and the 'learning society'.

References

AGCAS (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services) (1999) *Attitudes and more …*, London: AGCAS

Austin, J. L. (1962) How to do things with words, (2nd edition), Oxford University Press

Andreski, S. (1972) *Social Sciences as Sorcery*, London, Andre Deutsch

Barnett, R. (1994) *The Limits of Competence*, Buckingham: Open University Press

Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. (1966) The Social Construction of Reality, London: Allen Lane

Berthoud, R. (1999) *Young Caribbean men and the labour market: A comparison with other ethnic groups*, London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Bhaskar, R. (1979) The Possibility of Naturalism, Harvester

Blumer, H. (1969) Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method, Berkeley: University of Chicago Press

Boud, D. and Garrick, J. (eds) (1999) *Understanding Learning at Work*, London: Routledge

Boyatzis, R. (1982) *The Competent Manager* New York: John Wiley

Braverman, H. (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, New York: The Free Press

Burke, J. (ed) (1995) *Learning Outcomes and the Curriculum*, London: Falmer

Callon, M. (1986) 'Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay', in J. Law (ed) (1986) *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Clegg, S. (1990) *Frameworks of Power*, London: Sage

Coulter, J. (1989) Mind in Action, Humanities Press International

Craib, I. (1998) *Experiencing Identity*, London: Sage

Denzin, N. (1978) *The Research Act*, New York: McGraw-Hill

De Ville, O. (1986) *Review of Vocational Qualifications*: London: HMSO

DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) (1998) The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain

Donaldson, P. and Farquhar, J. (1988) *Understanding the British Economy*, London, Pelican

Draper, S. (1988) 'What's going on in everyday explanation?', in C. Antaki (ed), *Analysing Everyday Explanation*, London: Sage

Edwards, A. and Knight, P. (1995) *Assessing Competence in Higher Education*, London: Kogan Page

Garfinkel, H. (1967) *Ethnomethodology*, Cambridge: Polity

Gergen, K. (1989) 'Warranting Voice and the Elaboration of the Self', in J. Shotter and K. Gergen (eds), *Texts of Identity*, London: Sage

Gergen, K. (1991) *The Saturated Self*, Basic Books

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge: Polity

Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums*, New York: Anchor Books

Flew, A. (ed) *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, London, Macmillan

Hall, S. (1996) 'Who Needs "Identity" ', in S. Hall and P. du Gay (eds) (1996) *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London: Sage

Harré, R. (1983) *Personal Being*, Oxford: Blackwell

Harré, R. and Secord, P. (1972) *The Explanation of Social Behaviour*, Oxford: Blackell

Harré, R. and van Langenhove (eds) (1999) *Positioning Theory*, Blackwell

Henriques, J., Hollway, W., Urwin, C., Venn, C., and Walkerdine, W. (1984) *Changing the Subject*, London: Methuen

Holmes, L. (1994) 'Is competence a 'confidence trick"?', Proceedings from '*What is competence?' conference*, University of Leicester

Holmes, L. (2000) 'What can performance tell us about learning: Explicating a troubled concept', *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 9 (2), 253-266

Holmes, L. and Robinson, G. (1999) 'The Making of Black Managers: Unspoken Issues of Identity Formation', paper presented to *1st International Conference on Critical Management Studies*, Manchester, July

Honey, P. (1998) 'A declaration on learning', *People Management*, October

Hosking, D.M. and Morley I.E. (1991) *A Social Psychology of Organising*, Harvester Wheatsheaf

Hosking, D.M., Dachler, H. And Gergen, K. (eds) (1995) *Management and Organization: Relational Alternatives to Individualism*, Avebury

IMS (Institute of Manpower Studies) (1984) *Competence and Competition*, London: National Economic Development Office

Jarvis, P., Holford, J. and Griffin, C. (1998) *The Theory and Practice of Learning*, London: Kogan Page

Jenkins, R. (1996) *Social Identity*, London: Routledge

Jessup, G. (1991) *Outcomes: NVQs and the Emerging Model of Education and Training*, London: Falmer

Kennedy, H. (1997) *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education*, Coventry: Further Education Funding Council

Knapper, C. and Cropley, A (2000) *Lifelong Learning in Higher Education*, London: Kogan Page (3rd edition)

Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential Learning*, New York: Prentice Hall

Latour, B. (1987) *Science in Action*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

MSC (Manpower Services Commission) (1981) *A New Training Initiative: A Programme for Action*, London: MSC
Marsick, V. and Mitchell, V. (1990) *Informal and Incidental Learning in the Worplace,* London: Routledge

NCVQ (National Council for Vocational Qualifications) (1989) *The NVQ Criteria and Related Guidance*, London: NCVQ

Otter, S. (1992) *Learning Outcomes in Higher Education*, London: The Further Education Unit

Purcell, K. and Hogarth, T. (1999) *Graduate opportunities, social class and age: Employers' recruitment strategies in the new graduate labour market*, London: Council for Industry and Higher Education

Ranson, S. (ed.) (1998) *Inside the Learning Society*, London: Cassell

Rose, N. (1990) *Governing the Soul: The shaping of the private self*, London: Routledge

Ryle, G. (1949) *The Concept of Mind*, London, Hutchinson

Sampson, E (1988) 'The debate on individualism', American Psychologist, vol 40, 11, pp. 15-22

Schutz, A. (1932/ 1972) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, London: Heinemann

Scott, M. and Lyman, S. (1968) 'Accounts', *American Sociological Review*, vol 33, December 1968

Strauss, A. (1959) *Mirrors and Masks*, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press

Taylor, C. (1989) *Sources of the Self: the Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Taylor, F. (1911, 1967) *The Principles of Scientific Management*, New York: Harper and Row

Thomas, W. (1928) *The Child in America*, New York: Knopf

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Wittgenstein, L. (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell

Notes

[1]   We might also note Wittgenstein's (1953) notion of 'language games', and 'family resemblances' between these; such various contexts of the use of the term 'learning' may be viewed as different language games.

[2]   Toulmin makes use of this notion of inference-ticket in his development of the concept of *warranting* in forms of argumentation

[3]   We should also note the use of the term 'reading' when applied to undergraduate study. This usage seems to be confined to older universities; it would seem pretentious if used in relation to study at a newer university. This is yet another mark of the displacement by the language of learning.

[4]   The term 'train' is usually taken as a transitive verb, applied more to occupants of lower status positions (or animals). However, we might also note phrases such as 'training to be' and 'training for', especially in respect of high status occupations eg 'She is training to be a priest/ lawyer/ doctor', and 'She's training for the priesthood/ the bar'. This reinforces Wittgenstein's exhortation to 'look and see' usage rather

prescribe meaning through definition.

[5] Even here we should note that ethological studies of *naturally ocurring behaviour* raise serious doubts issues about the validity of findings from experimental studies.

[6] cf. Simmel's comment on confidence as 'one of the most important synthetic forces within society (1964: 318)

[7] Figure 3 is intended to be taken as a heuristic representation rather than as showing a fixed, quantitative relationship

[8] See also Holmes and Robinson (1999) for a discussion of the model, minus the 'indeterminate identity' zone

[9] See https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/ for details of licence

[10] cf the 'modes of ordering' in Law (1994)

[11] The UK Government is currently proposing to introduce 2-year 'associate degrees' as a key element in its plans to increase participation in higher education. The analysis here suggests that such plans may be counter-productive if these qualifications are regarded as lower status.