

## **Decontaminating the concepts of ‘learning’ and ‘competence’: education and modalities of emergent identity**

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### **Abstract**

This paper challenges the currently dominant framing of the purpose of higher education, and management development, ie as indexed by the key terms ‘learning’ and ‘competences’ (and cognates, such as ‘transferable skills’ and ‘key skills’). Within such framing, learning is viewed as a process *sui generis*, independent of content and context; competences etc are viewed as individual possessions which are prerequisites of competent performance. The paper argues that the conventional learning and competence agenda is based on a failure to recognise the *systematic ambiguity* of the key concepts, resulting in a flawed understanding of the relationship between higher education and the arena of occupational practices. It is argued that the *pedagogic* use of such terms relates to the

*evaluative* sense of the concepts, rather than their *explanatory* sense.

Exploration is made of the meaning of learning and competence in respect of anticipated performance. Arguing that socially meaningful and consequential human behaviour always depends upon processes of interpretation and construal, issues of practices and identity will be examined, to develop a reframing of the pedagogic understanding of the concepts of learning and competence. Central to this reframing is the analysis of the concept of identity, which will be examined in terms of the warranting of claims and affirmations and of trajectories through modalities of emergent identity.

## **Introduction**

Learning, we are told by the authors of the 'Learning Declaration'<sup>1</sup>, is "the central issue for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Honey, 1998). Learning, they state,

"is the most powerful, engaging, rewarding and enjoyable aspect of our personal and collective experience"  
(Honey, 1998: 28)

It is certainly clear that the *discourse* of learning has become a central issue in many areas of debate, particularly in higher education and in management education, training and development<sup>2</sup>. In higher education there is increasing emphasis upon 'learning and teaching', whilst the phrase 'management learning' is increasing displacing the phrases 'management education', 'management training' and 'management development' (and various combinations of these terms). Indeed, the discourse of learning seems to have itself displaced, or perhaps incorporated, the discourse of competence (Holmes, 1995a), with the term 'learning outcomes' being a generic term for competences<sup>3</sup> and cognates such as capabilities and skills<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, there has been an increasing emphasis on the notion of the 'learning

process', as educators and trainers are exhorted to focus on the 'facilitation' of the 'learning process' (rather than on teaching and training). Such developments are often presented in a proselytising style, such that to question what we may term 'the learning and competence agenda' is to invite the charge of being 'outmoded', 'old-fashioned', 'obstructionist', even a 'dinosaur'. The aim of this paper is to challenge what will be argued is a simplistic framing of learning and competence which is conceptually confused, and to seek to develop an alternative framing.

The target of the positive critique to be presented in this paper is what we may term 'the conventional model of learning and competence'. Within the conventional model, learning is viewed as a process *sui generis*, and the outcomes of such learning process are treated as possessions of individuals as monadic entities. Sometimes learning as a process is treated as being reducible to a single model, as in some treatments of and variations on the Kolb model of the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984); sometimes, various types of learning processes are presented. Common to both views is the assumption that the learning process may be treated as independent of content and context, *learning simpliciter*; this view is most clearly seen in the notion of 'learning to learn'. Learning outcomes may be expressed as competences or skills; in the management learning field the former term dominates, in higher education, terms such as 'capabilities', 'generic skills', 'transferable skills' and, increasingly in the UK following the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), 'key skills'. Whatever term used, the assumption is that these may be treated as possessions, capable of being acquired and developed by an individual; such possessions are used in performing tasks and jobs, transferred from one context to another, capable of being assessed in separately from their manifestation in situated performance.

The paper will argue that the conventional learning and competence agenda is based on a flawed understanding of the key concepts (learning, and competence, skills, capabilities etc). This has resulted in a flawed understanding of the relationship between higher education and METD, on the one hand, and the relevant arenas of occupational practices, on the other. It will be argued here that the terms 'learning', 'competence', 'skills' and so on are *systematically ambiguous*. That is, whilst such terms are used with relatively stable meaning in various contexts, the assumption that the meaning remains stable *between* such contexts is unwarranted and unsustainable. Because the discourse of the learning and competence agenda make such an assumption, the meaning of the terms in the context of pedagogic practice has become 'contaminated' by meanings which properly do not apply in that context. By paying attention to the meanings of the key concepts, through conceptual analysis, we may develop a better understanding of such concepts in relation to pedagogic purposes and practices, particularly with regard to occupational performance.

### **Ambiguity and conceptual contamination**

It has been long recognised that confusion may arise through inadequate attention to differences of meaning attached to the same term. Thus Aristotle gives the example of the term 'healthy' which may be used about an individual (a 'healthy body'), of a city, of diet and exercise, of complexion; we even talk of a 'healthy argument'. Clearly, the ways in which bodies can be healthy are not the same as the ways in which cities, diets, exercise or complexions (or arguments) may be healthy, although we may wish to say that there is some connection between the different meanings. Aristotle refers to such meanings as 'paronymous', rather than 'synonymous'.

Flew appears to render Aristotle's use of 'paronymous' as 'systematic ambiguity', giving the same example of the word 'healthy'. Systematic ambiguity arises when

"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).

This seems to accord with Austin's discussion of paronymity, whereby

"on different occasions of its use, [a] word may possess connotations which are *partly* identical and *partly* different..."  
(Austin, 1961: 27)

Others have used terms such as 'systematically misleading expressions' (Ryle, 1949),

'language strata' or 'the many-level structure of language' Waismann (1952), of the

danger of 'bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (Wittgenstein,

1953: 109). Andreski warns 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)

Given the variety of contexts of its use, the terms 'learning' and 'competence' are prime candidates for possible systematic ambiguity. The terms are used in a variety of modes of discourse and the contexts for these. In particular, we may note the following contexts:

- (a) mundane, ie as used in everyday interaction and conversation;
- (b) the arena of education and training, especially in relation to credentialisation;
- (c) professional and academic psychology, particularly in respect of various modes of experimental research and related theorising;
- (d) the management of employees within work organisations, in relation to decisions about selection, deployment, and training and development;
- (e) the management of such organisations themselves, as in, eg the notion of the 'learning organisation';

(f) the political-economic arena, ie in policy discourse.

If we examine the use of the terms 'learning' and 'competence' in these different modes of discourse, we can see that their meaning does *not* remain the same. As an 'untechnical' concept (Ryle, 1954) in mundane discourse, 'learning' differs in meaning from its use as 'technical' concept in education, or scientific psychology, or political-economic discourse; similarly with 'competence' and its cognates. Such technical use carries what Ryle (op. cit.) calls 'theoretical luggage'. In Wittgenstein's terms, these are different 'language-games' (Wittgenstein, 1953)<sup>5</sup>. Failure to recognise such difference in meaning may be seen to have led to the 'contamination' of the meaning of the concepts when used in educational and pedagogic discourse (Holmes, 2000c).

### **Learning as explanation, learning as evaluation**

In analysing the concept 'learning', we can distinguish between a number of different uses, in particular what we may term 'descriptive', 'explanatory', and 'evaluative' uses. *Descriptive* use may be seen in the case of a statement of the form 'A has learnt (to) X' (eg 'Jean has learnt the 9 times table', 'John has learnt to swim'), which may in effect be substituted by a statement of the form 'A can X' (eg 'Jean can recite the 9 times table', 'John can swim'). *Explanatory* use would be where we seek to explain some (non-instinctive) behaviour, ie as the result of a 'process of learning' giving rise to certain states (possession of competences). Such use is clearly seen in psychological discourse, where the concepts of learning and competence carries the 'theoretical luggage' referred to by Ryle (1954), particularly in respect of the particular school of psychology within which the explanation is being used (behaviourist, cognitivist, etc). *Evaluative* use would be where we express make some judgement about another

person, as the basis for action that *we* take. This would seem to be the use in the situation of assessment (formative or summative) in educational and pedagogic contexts, and in the selection and appraisal situations in employment contexts. Both explanatory and evaluative uses imply description, that is, some statement of purported empirical fact. However, the *basis* for asserting such a statement will be different for these different uses.

Such distinction between types of use of the terms 'learning' and 'competence' enables us to address the question of whether or not someone can learn something which is untrue, or to do something wrongly. People can believe all sorts of things to be true when they are not, and behave in ways that are ineffective or counter-productive to what they seek to achieve. We might say that they have learnt to do so, if we are attempting to explain this; consider, for example, the notion of 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1973). If we are prepared to say they *have* learnt, presumably we must also be prepared to say they possess certain competences (ie behavioural dispositions, expressed eg in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes etc) which give rise to the pattern of behaviour exhibited *irrespective* of whether such behavioural pattern is deemed to be desirable, for themselves or for others. However, in other circumstances, such as in assessment, we might say that they have not learnt, this latter usage being evaluative. It is thus vital that we treat with great care any discussion of the 'value of learning', to be clear whether we are using the term as explanatory or evaluative.

A number of examples of problematic use can be taken from the Learning Declaration, and no doubt from similar proselytising texts. The assertion that "learning is the key to developing a person's potential" is clearly problematic. If

'learning' is intended in an explanatory, it is surely wrong, for this would mean that 'learned helplessness' would be viewed as a case of a person's potential being developed. If intended in an evaluative sense, the statement may be viewed as something of a tautology: 'developing of potential' is part of the meaning of 'learning' in this evaluative sense of the word. Take also the assertion that "learning outcomes may be desirable or undesirable" alongside "learning is ...rewarding": does this mean that undesirable outcomes are rewarding? And what do we understand by the statement that "society survives and thrives through learning"? Surely this cannot be true unless we restrict the use of the concept to its evaluative sense, otherwise we would have to accept that all sorts of (explanatory-sense) learning of false beliefs, ineffectual behaviours, and undesirable attitudes, help a society to survive and thrive.

### **Learning and performance**

The preceding discussion points to a conceptual divide between the meaning of learning and competence when used in most psychological discourse and that when used in pedagogic discourse. The former is primarily an explanatory use, the production and application of a theoretical schema for explaining behaviour, whereas the latter is primarily evaluation of behaviour. We might also say that the former is mainly past-oriented, ie behaviour is explained in terms of past events and processes, such explanation then possibly being the basis for *probabilistic* prediction of future behaviour. In contrast, the latter use is mainly future-oriented, ie judgements about anticipated future performance on the basis of which progression is granted, qualifications are awarded, an individual is employed or promoted, and so on, or else these are withheld (Holmes, 1994). To some extent, we might say that the difference

is captured by the different meanings of 'expect', ie as referring to what we anticipate will happen or as an imperative.

As previously argued (Holmes, 1998; 2000b), drawing upon Ryle's (1949) analysis of statements of dispositions and occurrences, that statements using the past-tense of the verb 'to learn', ie of the form 'B has learnt X') are equivalent in meaning to statements such as 'B can X', 'B is competent to X' and so on. These should be treated not as statement of empirical fact but rather as 'semi-hypotheticals', which 'license' or warrant<sup>6</sup> us to make other statements. So to say 'Jack can swim' ('Jack has learnt to swim') is not in itself a description of some state of affairs but warrants us to say that, for example, if Jack were to find himself in a body of water (of greater depth than his own height etc), we would most likely see him begin to swim<sup>7</sup>. Statements of a person's competence, that they have learnt, in pedagogic contexts may thus be seen as primarily future-oriented, expressions of anticipation about that person's behaviour or performance in some future context. In order to warrant such expressions of anticipated behaviour, in a manner which generates the confidence of others who may be party to decisions which arise (eg award of a qualification, recruitment to a job), certain 'conventions of warrant' (Gergen, 1989) are adopted, principally the use of the vocabulary of learning, competence, skills and so on. But this should not confuse us into taking such vocabulary as referring to some existent entities or states when we seek to engage in the analysis of the relationship between pedagogic practice and occupational performance.

## **Considering performance**

Whether using 'learning' as an explanatory concept or as evaluative, any statement that, or question whether, someone has learnt (to do) something raises the issue of how we would know: on what basis we would answer either in the positive or in the negative? As Ryle's analysis of dispositions indicates, the usual answer would include some statement about the behaviour observed, assumed or anticipated. This applies as much to purported mental states, what would be termed 'knowledge and understanding', as to 'skills'. Knowledge and understanding are assessed through student performance in various forms of writing and spoken presentation. Many approaches to competence, notably that adopted by the national vocational qualifications system in the UK, take the form of extensive elaboration of the performance requirements which will be used to determine whether competence may be attributed.

However, a key problem with the concept of behaviour as applied to human beings is that it can be described and explained in many ways. As Hamlyn (1953) noted, this problem was recognised by Aristotle, distinguishing between 'kinesis' (translated as 'movement') and 'energeia' (translated as 'activity'). Whilst the former (eg reflexes) may be explained in terms of causal processes within human physiology, the latter can only be properly understood in terms of reasons and purposes, rather than mechanistic causes. The conceptualisation of behaviour that is of concern in educational and employment contexts is surely the latter, that is, socially meaningful and significant behaviour by human persons, rather than causally produced movement by biological mechanisms. Blumer, in his classical presentation of the Chicago version of symbolic interactionism, asserts strongly that

"to ignore the meaning of the things towards which people act is seen as falsifying the behaviour under study. To bypass 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, 1966: 3)

Harré and Secord (1972) develop a three-fold distinction: movements, actions and acts. An action-description give meaning to some movement; the socially significance of the action is given by reference to an act which it performs:

"We watch a man's hand move towards the extended fourth (sic!) finger of the hand of a woman and slip a gold ring on that finger. If this movement meets certain criteria it is an action in the performing of which, together with certain other actions, a marriage is achieved, that is, an act is performed. A *movement* is given *meaning* as an *action* by being identified as the performance or part of the performance of an *act*."  
(Harré and Secord, 1972: 158)

Crucially, there is no one-to-one correspondence between movements and actions, and between actions and acts. The act of marriage may be performed in different ways in different societies. A smile is a physical behaviour (performed by movement of certain muscles of the face) which may be a greeting, a threat, an apology and so on:

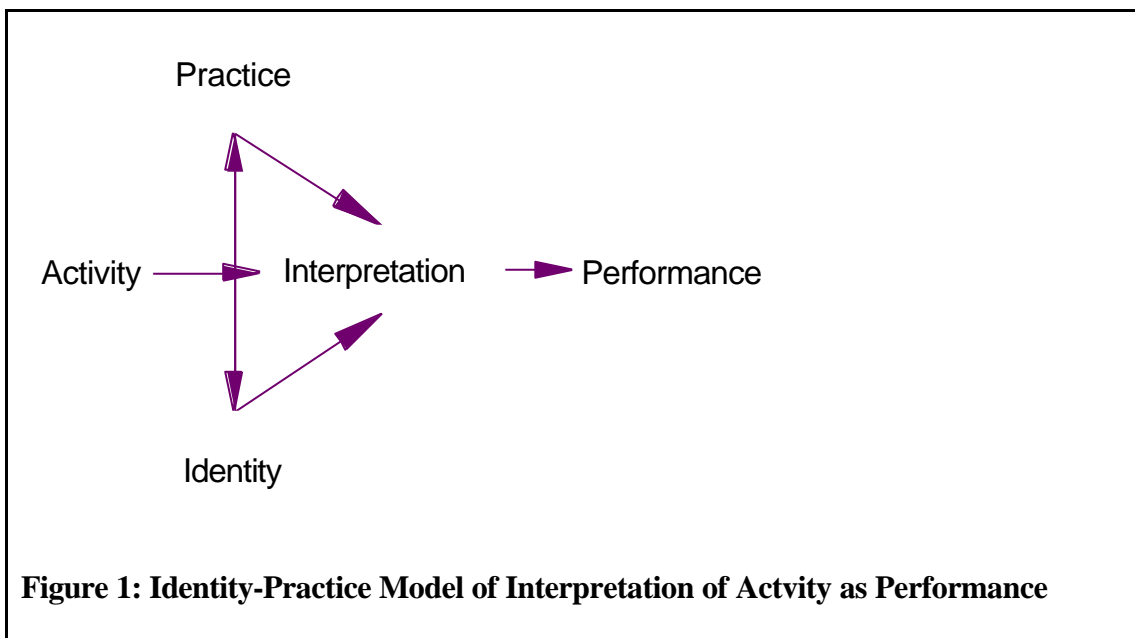
"Which act it represents on a particular occasion will depend on the overall definition of the encounter into which it fits and the kind of actions by which we perform the same act."  
(Harré, et al.1985: 83)

We should also note that the social meaning of particular action-act sequences is not given solely by the intention of the actor, but requires the corresponding interpretation, its 'supplement' (Gergen, 1994), by significant others.

### **Performance, practices and identity**

The analysis of learning and competence for pedagogic purposes cannot, therefore, rely upon a simplistic conceptualisation of human behaviour as being objectively observable. Rather, we need to consider how situated behaviour is construed or interpreted as a particular sort of behaviour, the performance of an action-act sequence. As previously argued, this may usefully be done through the practice-

identity model of interpretation of performance (figure 1) (Holmes, 2000a). Using the term 'activity' to refer to some particular behaviour which is in need of interpretation, and 'performance' as the particular socially meaningful action-act which it is construed to be, we may identify two key conditions that are necessary for the interpretation of the activity as performance-of-a-kind. First, there must be some set of practices appropriate to the situation, such that the construed performance is taken to be an instantiation of a particular practice. Second, there must be a set of identities or positions appropriate to the situation, such that the actor is taken as holding an identity legitimate for carrying out such a performance. Thus an individual in a workplace who tells their boss "your performance is unsatisfactory; you'd better pull your socks up" would be viewed engaging in misconduct, being insolent, rather than issuing a reprimand.



This interpretationist analysis of performance indicates that pedagogic practices that aim to enable individuals to perform satisfactorily in occupational settings must

address issues of both the practices and the identities appropriate to such settings. Such a view is expressed in the Lave and Wenger (1991) exploration of situated learning as the process of becoming a member of a 'community of practice' (and of practitioners). Now whilst sometimes the practices appropriate to a particular arena of practice may be amenable to a high degree of specification in terms of performance, often this is not the case. This is especially the case in what would be viewed as 'high discretion' occupational roles, which would include managerial jobs and the type of employment which is deemed appropriate for a graduate to undertake. This raises further issues for pedagogy in relation to such arenas.

Performance-based approaches to competence, such as the NVQ approach adopted for management education, training and development by the Management Charter Initiative, attempt to specify the practices of management in detailed performance terms. However, the performance criteria specified are replete with terms such as 'appropriate', 'relevant', 'sufficient', 'when required', 'where necessary' and so on. Such criteria are clearly not objective but require interpretation in context, and are open to disputation. This is simply what we would expect for such high discretion roles. If a manager's actual performance cannot be specified without recourse to such relational and modal expressions, so also the *anticipated* performance of a potential or new recruit to a management position, or to a 'graduate job', cannot be specified. It is the other element in the process of interpretation of activity as performance, identity, that now comes more strongly into play. That is to say, judgements about whether an individual is 'worthy' of being employed in such positions are likely to be based more on some judgement of the 'kind-of-person' they are.

## **Emergent identity: claim and affirmation**

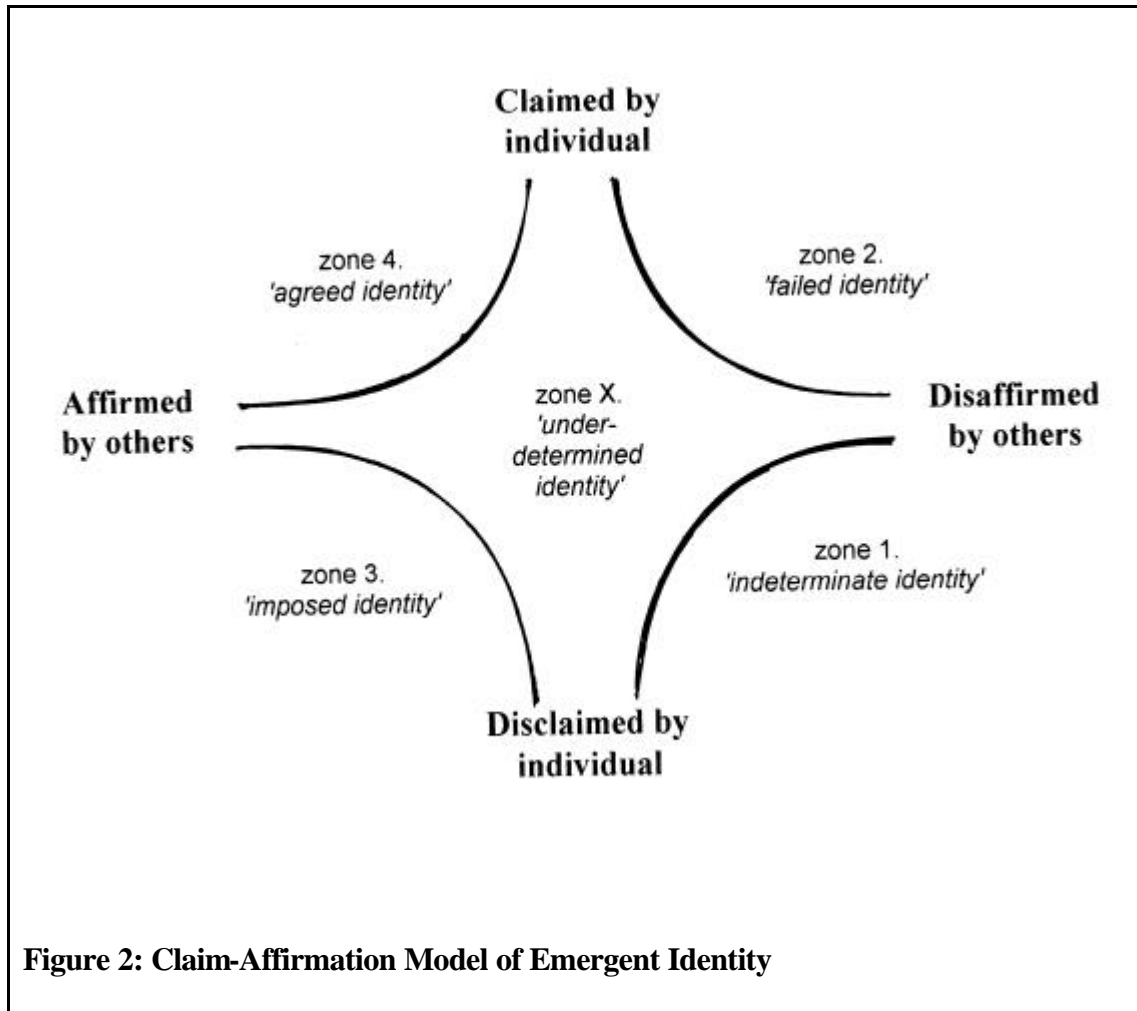
Again, however, we meet with issues of interpretation and construal. The notion of identity is a sensitising concept (Strauss, 1997) which alerts us to the contested nature of the question of who someone is in relation to some social situation and context. On the one hand, the individual in question will have some understanding of who they see themselves to be, and as whom they wish others to see them as, their 'presentation of self' or 'personal identity'. On the other hand, others will ascribe to the individual their perceptions of who-they-are, their 'social identity'. Jenkins (1996) refers to this as the 'internal-external dialectic of identification', emphasising that

"It is not enough to assert an identity. That identity must also be validated (or not) by those with whom we have dealings."  
(Jenkins, 1996: 21)

Furthermore, as Jenkins makes clear through referring to 'identification', situated identity is not static but is in continuous process. We may say that identity is not possessed; rather, it is performed by the interplay of self-presentation and ascription, assertion and validation, claim and affirmation, or, as the case may be, by their contraries. To keep such notions in mind, we may talk of 'emergent identity' (Holmes, 2000a) to refer to the outcome, albeit fragile, of such interplay in a particular situation at any particular moment in time.

Taking this internal-external, personal and social, processual and dialectical approach, we may consider emergent identity in terms of 'modalities'. Where a person's claim on an identity, eg as a manager, is affirmed by significant others, we may say that the individual has the 'agreed identity' as manager. Where the claim is disaffirmed by others, we may say that the individual has a 'failed identity'. Figure 2 presents the main modalities of emergent identity of significance, including a central 'zone' of

'under-determined identity' where claim (or disclaim) and affirmation (or disaffirmation) are made tentatively.



The model is, of course, intended as a heuristic device rather than as mapping objectively identifiable aspects of an individual. In particular, it enables us to consider the 'identity projects' (Harré, 1983) of individuals in terms of trajectories through modalities of emergent identity. The 'happy' trajectory would be where someone moves from 'indeterminate identity' (zone 1) to 'agreed identity' (zone 4) with a minimal period in 'zone X', ie 'under-determined identity'. However, other trajectories are possible. An individual may struggle to gain affirmation to their claim on an

identity, moving from zone 1 to zone 2 ('failed identity'), before moving back into zone X and onto zone 4. Even when someone achieves 'agreed identity', there is the possibility that later others may begin to question (zone X) or even disaffirm (moving back to zone 2); such would be the case of downgrading or dismissal. Alternatively, the person themselves may question whether they wish to have the identity<sup>8</sup>, possibly moving to a position in which they disclaim the identity whilst still being ascribed it by others (zone 3, 'imposed identity').

### **Warranting and accounting**

As emergent identity arises in the dialectical interplay between individual claim and social ascription, there is the ever-present possibility that there will be contestation between these. How, then, can any stability of identity be achieved, however temporary? How can and does an individual present their claim on an identity such that its affirmation by significant others is achieved? How can and do significant others ascribe an identity to an individual, such that it is accepted by the individual? This may be understood in terms of the notion of warranting (Toulmin, 1958; Draper, 1988; Gergen, 1989), ie the use of conventional, legitimated, normalised modes of discourse to support the claim that some state of affairs holds. Allied to the notion of warranting is that of 'accounting' and 'accounts' (Scott and Lyman, 1968), which may be seen as a special case of warranting where some disputation, actual or potential, arises between views about what state of affairs holds. Scott and Lyman use the term 'accounts' to refer to "a linguistic<sup>9</sup> device employed whenever an action is subject to evaluative enquiry" (op. cit., 46),

"a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behaviour - whether that behaviour is his own or that of others, and whether the proximate cause for the statement arises from himself or from someone else."

(ibid.)

We might expect that accounting would become important in the contexts where individual claim on identity is subject to tentative disaffirmation, or where ascription of an identity is tentatively being disclaimed by the individual.

Because warrants and accounts are part of the processes of communication through which emergent identity is constructed, they provide a source of empirical material for exploring modalities of emergent identity and trajectories through such modalities. There is growing use of forms of narrative inquiry and life history approaches to research, in the management field (Hill, 1993; Holmes, 1995, 2001; Watson and Harris, 1999) and in respect of post-graduation experiences of persons who have undertaken higher education (Holmes et al., 1998; Ward and Jenkins, 1999; Jenkins, et al., 2001). Such research should provide a rich source of material for studying how individuals warrant their identity claims to researchers in the context of research inquiry.

For example, in a study by the author of this paper of 'novice managers', the seemingly simple question 'in what sense would you say your job is managerial?' elicited two types of answers. Some gave a straightforward response describing their responsibilities:

"Head of buildings, plural, operations [...] kind of facilities manager, if you like [...]. My direct responsibilities are for security, cleaning, bookings, and fabric and buildings maintenance. [...] Reporting to me directly? My deputy, one, site officer, two [...] directly to me, three [...] there's many other managers and supervisors [...] but they go up to the sites officer and the sites officer reports to me."

"[My job is] actually termed as an office co-ordinator [...] first of all supervising seven people, that's administration, and that includes a payroll system for 450 people."

However, others who did not have direct supervisory responsibilities, answered in the form of 'I'm not a manager but...'. The 'but' may be seen as a tacit claim on the right to be considered as undertaking managerial responsibilities:

"Right, well I'm managing processes rather than people [...] Obviously a lot of my decisions affect a lot of other people and also I have to share my decisions with other people, confer with them before actually doing anything. But it's the initiative that would come from myself."

"Indirectly [it's a managerial job], because although I am not managing staff, I am managing projects. I am budgeting schemes for the mentally ill people, so I oversee the running of various schemes. I am actually on a management committee for several different schemes ... So I do staff recruitment and am involved in all that."

The case of one manager is interesting in terms of how he discusses his experience of his first job after leaving the army, as cleaning manager at a holiday camp.

"I realised that I'd grossly undershot my mark, my target [...] I started looking at advertisements [for jobs] and noticed one which was double in salary and responsibility was far, far greater than I had at the time. So I applied and got it."

In terms of the model of modalities of emergent identity, we may say that having achieved the 'agreed identity' of cleaning manager ('zone 4'), he soon began to disclaim that identity ('zone X'), laid claim on another identity (as a higher level manager) which was affirmed ('zone 4'). This location was stabilised by the actions taken by the individual, and the response by his new employer:

"I got stuck in, and got stuck into many things [...] and started putting quite a lot of things right. And my line manager at the time said 'we're going to upgrade you, we're going to change your title to 'Head of ...', and make you a spending head [ie having spending and budgetary authority] because of the title'."

Significantly, this person *discounts* the period spent as a cleaning manager as part of his employment career, *accounting* for it as "my first step out of the army, to get my feet".

Another manager, recruited as security administration manager, found that one of his staff had himself expected to get that job. The subordinate expressed his view that *he* should have been appointed by resisting the manager's instructions and attempting to enrol other staff in such resistance. The manager was thus faced with a disaffirmation of his claim on the identity which potentially could spread amongst his staff. His response was to seek the affirmation of his own manager:

"I just explained to the admin. manager that I thought I'd tried my best and I thought the person was totally unreasonable. And suggested there were reasons for this behaviour, which I explained, which I thought was my perception of why they were behaving that way. And it came to a head, where they had to be disciplined because it was almost worse than sabotage, it that's the word."

Clearly such a strategy of seeking intervention by his superior carried the risk that he might be seen as being unable to control his own staff, and thus not entitled to claim the identity of manager. He provided an account for the difficulties he was experiencing (that the recalcitrant subordinate was disaffected by not getting the job) and for taking the matter to a higher level (that he had tried his best), and warranted the request for intervention (that the subordinate's actions were sabotaging the work). Resolution was achieved by gaining affirmation of his identity claim by his superior through disciplinary action being taken on the subordinate, thus warranting his claim on the identity amongst his own staff.

Limitation of space here prohibits further examples of how this mode of framing in terms of the warranting, and the modalities, of emergent identity, may be used to gain and empirically-based grasp of the issues involved in the trajectories of individuals into and within managerial and graduate employment. Moreover, the examples given above are based on the individuals' warrants and accounts; a fuller exploration and analysis would need to examine the warrants and accounts given by other parties, including those who are involved in recruitment and management of recruits. The

main argument here is that, insofar as issues of identity are of critical importance in respect of understanding the process of interpretation of activity as performance, and thus of attributions of learning and competence, such issues may be explored empirically rather than merely by reference to hypothetical constructs such as the learning process (*sui generis*), competences, skills and the like.

### **Practices and the language of learning and competence**

The focus on warranting, in respect of emergent identity, leads us back to the issue of practices. Whilst, as argued above, the practices appropriate to occupations such as management, and to the type of occupations generally regarded as 'graduate employment', are not capable of being highly specified in performance terms, the vocabulary which is normally used in respect of such practices is important. There is a fair degree of commonality in the language of such practices, typically used in various lists of 'what a manager does', 'management competences', 'transferable skills', and so on. As Hirsch and Bevan (1988) point out from their research on managerial skills language, such commonality exists at the level of terminology, but not necessarily at the level of meaning. If practices cannot be specified in any significant degree of detail, and the language lacks precision, what is its role?

The answer to that question may be found in terms of warranting. An individual seeking to claim on the identity of manager, eg as a potential recruit into management, may use the language of learning and competence as generalised modes of referring to practices in warranting their claim. Reference to (claimed) previous experience in

'managing projects', 'problem solving', 'leading a team', 'communicating' provide what Draper (1988) terms 'first rate warrants', providing a connection between what the individual claims to have done in the past with the conventional language in which required managerial performance is expressed. This also provides the recruiter to warrant their ascription of 'managerial potential' on the part of the potential recruit, thus warranting their own claim on the identity as a 'competent recruiter'. Through this, the 'web of confidence' linking the various parties to the process may be developed and maintained (Holmes, 1994).

Such a relational-constructionist (Hosking et al., 1995; Hosking, 2000) should not be interpreted as arguing that there is no basis for attributions of learning and competence in terms of activity and the 'real' consequences of activity. Whilst in principle, an activity by an individual may be construed as performance in multiple ways, there are limits to this. Where the actions of a manager are judged to have resulted in undesirable consequences (eg loss of a contract, legally-enforced penalties, poor sales, downturn in market share), and even where such actions may be accounted for without disaffirmation of identity in the short term, later events may lead to reconsideration, rejection of the account, and thus of identity disaffirmation. Similarly, although a new incumbent may be allowed a 'honeymoon period' in which the tendency is to construe some activity as understandable-if-not-appropriate performance in the circumstances (eg a 'useful learning experience!'), the significant others in the situation may at some stage decline to continue in this vein. Behaviour may be reconstrued, the individual may be repositioned, warrants and accounts may be rejected. The point is that meaning is given, or withheld, by social actors within

social contexts rather than by 'objective' facts about a 'real world' lying outside of the milieu of interpretive practice.

### **Reframing a pedagogic view of learning**

The above analysis enables us to reframe our understanding of the meaning of 'learning' and 'competence' in respect of pedagogy. If the purpose of 'higher-level' educational and training practices is to enable individuals to enter, and perform in desirable ways in, particular social arenas, then such practices should focus on how those individuals may warrant their claim on the relevant identities. Such warranting would include reference to the social practices appropriate to such arenas, so that the individuals may relate their activity to those practices. This may be done through pedagogic practices that are well-known, have been carried out throughout human history and prehistory, and refined through their institutionalisation in formal education and training approaches. These include, variously and in various ways, explanation, demonstration and exemplification by those with expertise, by experimentation, rehearsal, and practising on the part of the novice, by occasional testing and remedial action. When this succeeds, or is seen to be succeeding, we say that they are learning; and we say that they are learning, and have learnt, when they succeed. There is no need to posit some hypothetical notion of a learning process *sui generis* which causes successful performance, for such performance is not the result of causal action but the negotiated outcome of interpretive processes.

It is true that the ancient reliance on person-to-person interaction, master-and-novice, teacher-and-student, has been supplemented through technological developments such as the inventions of writing, printing, audio and video recording and tele-modes of communication. But this does not mean that such technological developments allow

for unmediated learning in the sense of a process *sui generis*, for the user of such technologies must still warrant their claim to have learnt if the use of these is to be of social consequence. The vogue for the term 'experiential learning' similarly does not tell us anything more than that an individual *claims* to have learnt, usually as part of warranting their claim on the relevant identity. The important word in the phrase 'accreditation of prior experiential learning' is not 'learning' but 'accreditation', ie the warranted award of a qualification, which will have social consequence only if accepted by gatekeepers to the arenas to which the individual seeks entry, or within which they seek progression, on the basis of the award.

The aim of this paper has not been to deny that the concepts of learning and competence have no meaning, but to argue that their meaning within educational contexts has become confused in the currently-dominant mode of their framing. Their meaning has been 'contaminated' by the meanings which properly belong in different arenas, different 'language games'. By differentiating between the meanings in these different arenas, we may better be able to examine what we are about when we engage in pedagogic practice. Framing learning as a process *sui generis*, hypothesising such a process as free of content and context, *learning simpliciter*, serves to obscure rather than illuminate the issues at stake. In contrast, it has been argued, reframing learning through the interpretationist, relational-constructionist perspective outline here sheds new light on a much-troubled field. Such reframing provides for *empirically-based* studies of the phenomena of concern, rather than requiring the use of concepts whose reference remains metaphysical. It also suggests

modes of practical application in educational and training contexts, pedagogic methods, without reference to vague notions of 'facilitation'.

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<sup>1</sup> The 'Learning Declaration' was produced by a group of 8 persons well-known the management education, training and development field: John Burgoyne, Ian Cunningham, Bob Garratt, Peter Honey, Andrew Mayo, Alan Mumford, Michael Pearn, and Mike Pedler. It was published in *People Management*, the journal of the Institute of Personnel and Development, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1998.

<sup>2</sup> The discourse of learning extends beyond these areas into wider public policy debate, as indexed by, for example, notions of 'lifelong learning', 'learning society', 'the Learning Age', and so on.

<sup>3</sup> There is debate about the difference, or otherwise, between competences and competencies, particularly in respect of whether this is mere spelling convention or indicative of a more substantive distinction. For the purposes of this paper, the former spelling will be adopted; substantive issues about the nature of competences/ competencies are addressed later.

<sup>4</sup> In higher education in the UK, the term 'key skills' has become commonplace, largely because of its adoption by the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) and subsequent public policy usage. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'competences' will be taken as including cognates such as 'key skills', 'generic skills', 'capabilities' and the like.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to recognise that by 'language game', Wittgenstein does not mean a 'game of language': "I shall call the whole, consisting of language *and the actions into which they are woven*, the 'language-game'." (Wittgenstein, 1953: 7; emphasis added)

<sup>6</sup> Ryle's use of the term 'license' seems to be consonant with Toulmin's (1958) use of the term 'warrant'; indeed, Toulmin explicitly cites Ryle as a major influence on his own analysis.

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- <sup>7</sup> What the utterer of such a statement would be prepared to say, and what they expect others to understand, would of course depend on the context. Said by a parent of Jack (as a child) when asked whether he needs a buoyancy aid in a garden swimming pool, this would have different meaning from that when said at the end of a course for adults who cannot swim.
- <sup>8</sup> This would seem to apply in the case of 'reluctant managers' (Scase and Goffee, 1989), mid-career middle-ranking managers who begin to view their prospects of reaching the top as unrealistic and so question the degree of commitment they give to their job and organisation.
- <sup>9</sup> To refer to accounts *solely* as 'linguistic devices' is somewhat limiting; instead, we might say 'discursive devices', allowing for 'extra-linguistic' forms of communication.