

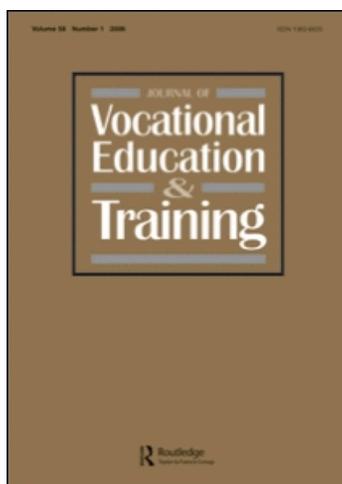
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The Evolution of Key Skills: towards a Tawney paradigm

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ABSTRACT This article charts the evolution of key skills from 'A Basis for Choice' to the present day. It is an annotated history of key skills and seeks to present a coherent view of how the current list emerged, and why issues such as formal assessment, integration and a two-tier skills structure have become part of post-16 reform. The article examines the social, economic, political and philosophical influences on the evolution of key skills and, in particular, how the Dearing Report and current government thinking has been influenced by the thinking of R. H. Tawney. The article identifies the emergence of a new compromise paradigm based on Tawney and concludes with a brief discussion on the likely future development of key skills within the context of a new flexible qualifications structure.

Introduction

Key skills are defined as generic, transferable skills that people can learn and develop in a wide variety of situations, whether in education or in the workplace. It is claimed that individuals need them in order to be effective, flexible, adaptable and mobile within the labour market, although substantial and coherent arguments have been raised against what some see as a wasteful 'chimera hunt' in pursuit of spurious transferability (Hyland & Johnson, 1998). They are seen by supporters as crucial to an individual's employability, career prospects and to maintaining an acceptable standard of living. Society benefits also from having an adaptable and well-trained workforce to compete with competitor nations such as Germany, Japan and the emerging economies of Southeast Asia (Dearing, 1996).

At present, there are six recognised key skills:

- communication;
- application of number;
- information technology;

- working with others;
- improving own learning and performance;
- problem-solving.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Department for Education and Employment, and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority all recommend the same set of key skills. The first three – the ‘main’ or ‘hard’ key skills – used to be mandatory in GNVQ courses, but have now been ‘de-coupled’, and the second three – the ‘wider’ or ‘soft’ key skills – are included in nearly all Modern Apprenticeships and National Traineeships.

Of course, there are other advanced skills beyond key skills that transcend and complement them, such as competence in a modern foreign language, and assorted practical and managerial skills. These, too, can be determinants of successful career progression. Similarly, there are more fundamental skills underlying key skills. Basic skills such as literacy and numeracy form the solid foundation upon which key skills are built. As the government consultation document ‘Qualifying for Success’ (Qualification & Curriculum Authority [QCA], 1998) put it:

Basic skills are the starting point for everyone ... but for continued success in employment and lifelong learning, young people and adults need to build on that solid foundation with key skills. Key skills are not about putting right a basic skills deficit. They are about putting basic skills to work in new contexts to support the changes and transitions that are part of everyone’s experience. People with a solid grounding in the key skills – and the ability to update them throughout life – will have a head start in the workplace and beyond.

The government believes that the traditional post-compulsory curriculum is too narrow and inflexible compared to that of competitor nations, and that there is inadequate opportunity to combine vocational and academic study in Britain (QCA, 1999). It is keen to support broader academic and vocational qualifications by underpinning them with a key skills qualification.

To judge whether key skills can justify such a vital supporting role in this reform, it is necessary to explore the evolution of key skills in terms of their social, political and philosophical influences.

Socio-political Background to Key Skills

The concept of core skills has its origins in the nature of education in industrial Britain (Green, 1998), where there was no historic link between technical and general education, unlike continental Europe say, where they enjoyed parity of cultural esteem (Higginson, 1979), in aspiration at least. This technical education paradigm of mainland Europe can be said

to rest on two pillars, which were absent in Britain largely as the result of the predominance of a voluntarist tradition:

- The belief that technology is the industrial application of science and therefore to be held in high regard. For example, the prestigious engineering schools of France are held in higher esteem than its universities.
- The belief that those with technical knowledge should be capable of good expression and communication, provided by a minimum of general non-vocational education.

The model of vocational education in Britain was apprenticeship, which was practical and work-based, but divorced from mainstream education. It was only nominally supported by employers and participation in general education was voluntary, so there was little encouragement for young school-leavers to become widely skilled or mobile. It was not desired socially (to move labour from area to area) and it was not required economically (as there was employment enough in any given location). Technical education was largely the remit of the Mechanics Institute, the City and Guilds of London Institute and evening classes, and although the 1964 Industrial Training Act made day release to colleges a statutory part of apprenticeships, most courses excluded general academic education. To a large extent, the low status of skills education in Britain is a legacy of this work-based apprenticeship system and the fact that there is no history of education as a preparation for informed citizenship. This is in stark contrast to France, for example, where the Education Minister Jack Lang recently (*Sunday Times*, 21 May 2000) reiterated support for education to be:

... *fundamental to the development of independent judgment and the enlightened exercise of citizenship.*

In Britain, while political *noblesse oblige* was well developed in the liberal-educated ruling classes, the working classes were passive recipients of government, rather than active participants in it. As a consequence, education for the 'governed' was reduced to narrow vocational training, where usefulness was gauged only in terms of the competence it produced in the workforce. However, as industrial Britain declined, the education system had to respond to increasingly desperate economic circumstances and it did so largely by the inclusion of generic skills in apprenticeship training programmes. By the late 1970s, City & Guilds courses contained mandatory and assessed components in communication skills, but by then apprenticeship was in decline anyway and unemployment was the prospect that awaited many academically less able students. The worsening socio-economic situation was exacerbated by the fact that many young unemployed also lacked social/life skills. Courses on 'general' skills emerged as part of Youth

Opportunity and Unified Vocational programmes to the extent that, by the time of economic recovery, Youth Training Schemes included five core skills: numeracy, communication, problem-solving, information technology and manipulative dexterity (Further Education Unit [FEU], 1983).

Philosophical Background to Key Skills

The developments outlined above, because they were originally driven by economic necessity, contained unresolved philosophical tensions between two contrasting models of education:

- The sociocentric model, which coupled education with training and whose primary purpose was to produce economic prosperity.
- The liberal individualist model, which regarded training as merely utilitarian because it placed little emphasis on conceptual understanding and was concerned only with the ability to perform.

In retrospect, a serious attempt to reconcile these extremes of sociocentric and liberal education had already been made by Tawney some 50 years before the Ruskin College speech and his legacy survives today, most obviously in the thinking of New Labour and Giddens' notion of third way politics. Tawney regarded education as both a resource for the community *and* a benefit to the individual, and in that respect, his philosophy was both liberal and sociocentric: liberal insofar as education was seen, not as narrow vocationalism, but as an enhancement of the mind; and sociocentric in that it was not just of benefit to the individual, but to the entire community (Tawney, 1988).

It is this underlying belief in the possibility of philosophical, political and economic convergence that ultimately drives the key skills agenda and post-compulsory education reform today. Policy-makers have arrived at a point of confluence between philosophic and economic justification. In this new paradigm – the 'Tawney paradigm' (Figure 1) – skills education stands as a bridge between social interventionism and *laissez faire* liberalism. It is intended to serve both society and the individual. It spans the vocational/academic divide because it serves as both vocational element in a liberal curriculum and as general element in a technical curriculum, and to that extent, it attempts to resolve the disparity between the British/liberal and the European/technical paradigms outlined in the previous section.

The Evolution of the Key Skills List

In 1979, a seminal document, 'A Basis for Choice' was produced by the Further Education Unit, in which the notion of a core skills curriculum for vocational study was developed. It was the first major work on core skills

and, while it was intended to enable skilled school leavers to make informed career and social decisions, an unintended, but important, by-product was that it developed in Further Education (FE) colleges a level of expertise not found in schools. Thus, in the Dearing era two decades later, when the rationale for key skills training combined economic necessity with social desirability, most FE colleges were better prepared than schools for (and less resistant to) the implementation of a skills curriculum (West et al, 2000).

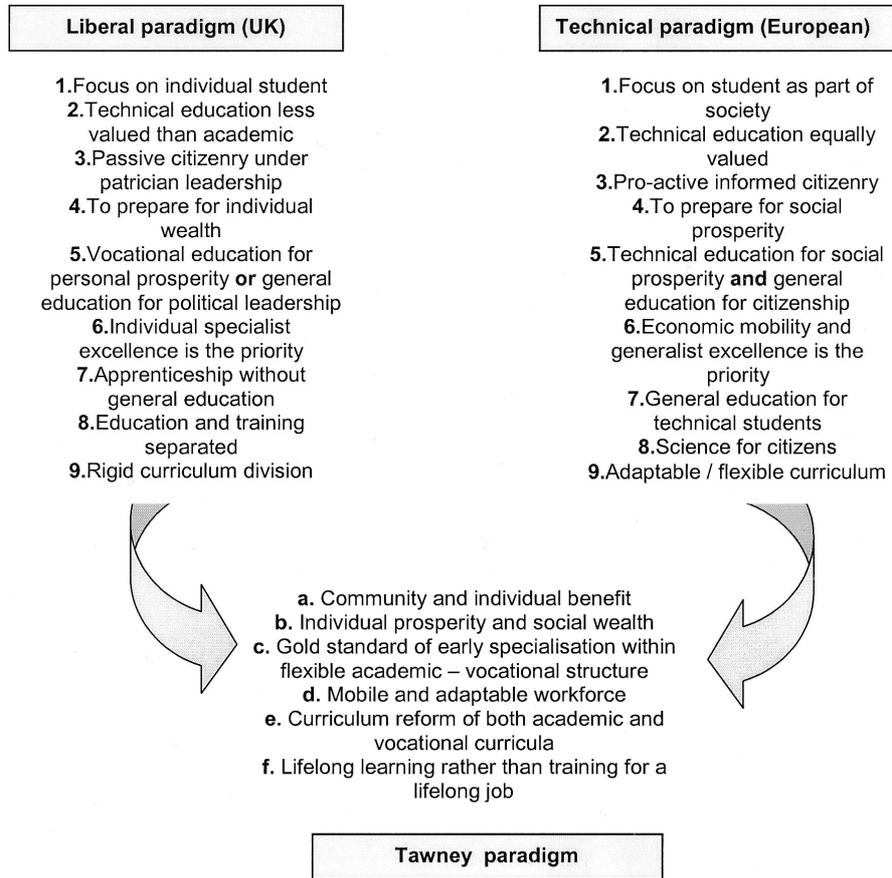


Figure 1. The Tawney paradigm: spanning the divide.

In the years that followed, unemployment and changing technology finally put paid to the notion that a skill learned in apprenticeship would last for life. In 1982, the FEU published its 'Basic Skills' document in which the

two guiding principles of today's key skills were outlined – genericness and transferability (FEU, 1982). (Generic skills are skills found in a wide variety of jobs and learning situations; transferability is the property that allows skills learned in one environment to be used in another.)

One year later, skills education had become secure enough to risk enumeration. The FEU (1983) described core skills for Youth Training Schemes as consisting of:

- numeracy;
- communications;
- problem-solving;
- IT;
- manual dexterity.

By the mid-eighties, core skills had found their way into Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC) and City & Guilds courses and by 1991, BTEC had expanded its list of common skills to include (at the expense of manual dexterity):

- improving and managing self;
- working with others;
- design and creativity.

Curiously, the new vocationalism that emerged in the late eighties came, not from the Department for Education and Science, but from the Manpower Services Commission through its Technical and Vocational Initiative. The Confederation of British Industry took up the idea of a common skills curriculum in their 'Towards a Skills Revolution' documents (CBI, 1989a,b), in which they advocated the following skills as being among the desirable results of vocational education:

- communication;
- applying numeracy;
- applying technology;
- problem-solving;
- values and integrity;
- understanding work;
- personal skills;
- dealing with change.

In 1989, Education Secretary Baker made three proposals which have defined and permeated the skills debate ever since (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1989). First, that the following core skills be integrated into established programmes:

- communication;
- numeracy;
- personal relationships;

- familiarity with technology;
- familiarity with systems;
- familiarity with change.

Secondly, that levels be assigned to core skills through formal assessment and, thirdly, that core skills should form the basis of a credit transfer system between vocational and academic awards. The origins of integration and formal assessment can thus be traced to Baker, as can the perception that key skills have a role in bridging the academic – vocational divide. Baker, who coined the phrase ‘core skills’, attempted to give core skills a justification within a particular politico-economic paradigm, but what he missed in so doing, that New Labour years later did not, was the opportunity to use skills education and curriculum reform as a means of integrating socio-economic prosperity with traditional individualist liberalism.

While large areas of the core skills proposals were not controversial, as evidenced by the many disparate organisations signing-up to the notion, the Baker stance was by no means uncontentious. Proponents of liberal education challenged the very idea that a list of skills could bring about breadth and balance, and others pounced on the alleged lack of philosophical depth at the root of core skills (Tribe, 1996). In addition, some uncertainty was created by the fact that, although the approaches of the two main players (government and industry) were similar, they were not identical. The DES treated core skills and the issue of bridging the academic-vocational divide separately, whereas the CBI regarded the two issues as inextricably linked.

Curiously, while the neo-liberal manifesto of the Conservative government was running out of steam, the key skills agenda was gathering momentum. In 1989, Education Secretary MacGregor invited the National Curriculum Council (NCC), the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the Schools Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) to develop specifications for core skills in six areas:

- communication;
- problem-solving;
- personal skills;
- application of mathematics;
- information technology;
- a modern foreign language.

The following year, in response to the invitation, NCC, NCVQ and SEAC published their reports. The NCC report (1990) proposed incorporating communication, problem-solving and personal skills into *all* A-level syllabuses, and numeracy, IT and a modern foreign language into the most appropriate ones, although it did not explain how students were to be persuaded to study them, given that they were not part of the qualification curriculum.

The other two reports (SEAC, 1990; NCVQ, 1990) emphasised that the first three skills were already included in most qualifications anyway, so in their view, it was simply a matter of signposting what was already present. They endorsed the six skills enumerated in the NCC report and the proposal to include them in A-level syllabuses. They further proposed that performance in core skills should influence grades in A-level examinations, stressed the need for better quality control and recommended separate reporting of core skills in the form of hierarchically arranged statements of attainment for each student.

Although the government rejected these proposals as interference in the 'gold standard' that was A-level, the skills bandwagon was by now unstoppable. By 1992, the broadly-based GNVQ contained three mandatory skills:

- communication;
- numeracy;
- IT;

and three desirable additional skills:

- problem-solving;
- a modern foreign language;
- personal skills.

Thus it was that the notion of hard and soft (or 'main' and 'wider') key skills gained currency and formed the basis for today's two-tier structure. The concentration of key skills in GNVQ also explains the lower level of key skills expertise among A-level teachers in the school sector (West et al, 2000), where there was less opportunity for staff to share experience with GNVQ colleagues.

Key Skills: the list of lists

Today's six key skills, in two groups of three, have come a long way in the decades since 'A Basis for Choice'. The list has changed significantly over the years, as Table I shows, reflecting different economic circumstances and alternate political perspectives.

A number of features are worthy of comment:

- The presence from the beginning of communication and number-based skills indicates the perceived importance of literacy and numeracy to personal and social prosperity. It also points to the growing realisation that the education system had previously failed to prepare individuals for the changing nature of employment, which may, in turn, have contributed to Britain's economic decline.
- The absence of Information Technology from the Baker list of 1989, but not from the CBI list of the same year, may indicate some divergence of

opinion between government and industry at this point. It may also reflect a lack of awareness on the part of the government as to the potential for IT-based industry to create and sustain employment.

- Baker's list is notable too for being the only one that does not include problem-solving. Although problem-solving was included on all skills lists before and after Baker, it is the one which, to date, remains the least developed. Why this should be so is unclear, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is difficult to standardise its assessment.
- The two soft key skills of 'Working with Others' and 'Improving own Learning and Performance' can be seen to originate in the BTEC proposals of 1986 and 1991. Their continued inclusion reflects a perception that both individual and group performance is important for prosperity in the new 'post-Fordist' economy.
- The mysterious disappearance (and some would say appearance) of 'values and integrity' from the CBI list is striking. There is no suggestion and little possibility that it was subsumed into another skill, so the message is either that ethical behaviour is not a skill or that it is not a skill worth having. The liberal notion that education should equip the young to 'reflect critically' and to exercise a 'capacity for autonomous moral judgement' (Jonathan, 1995) now seems to be redundant.
- The absence of skills associated with political participation and foreign language learning points to the fact that a continental European paradigm is not being adopted here by stealth. The current list of key skills (QCA, 1999) is based on a compromise paradigm that may still lag the European model in political terms, as the concept of citizenship on the continent moves towards a new pro-active federalism.

Key Skills and Curriculum Reform

Although the Education Reform Act of 1988 left 16-19 education and training largely untouched, it signalled paradoxically both the demise and resurrection of the core skills agenda. Its part demise was caused by a shift in attention from philosophical issues to practical administrative ones; and its resurrection came from the new National Curriculum which, though virtually indistinguishable from the national curriculum of 1904, did at least guarantee that whatever was taught would carry the *imprimatur* of centralised government and public accountability. When the National Curriculum was revised in the next decade, it was done with the explicit intention that schools and colleges would use it as an opportunity to teach key skills (Dearing, 1996).

1979	FEU	A basis for choice	Literacy Numeracy Graphicity Problem-solving Study skills Political and economic literacy Coping skills and self-sufficiency Manual skills Personal and moral Physical and technical environment
1983	FEU	Supporting YTS	Communication Numeracy IT Problem-solving Manual dexterity
1985	BTEC & City and Guilds	Certificate of Pre-vocational Education	Communication Numeracy IT Problem-solving Personal/career development Industrial, social and environmental studies Social studies Science and technology Creative development Practical skills
1986	BTEC	Common Skills and Core Themes	Communication Numeracy IT Problem-solving (interdiscipline) Working with others Self-development Organisation of self Studying and learning Analysis of information Science and technology Design skills Practical skills
1989	CBI	Towards a Skills Revolution (2)	Communication Applying numeracy Applying technology Problem-solving Values and integrity Understanding work Personal skills Dealing with change
1989	DES (Baker)	Further Education: a new strategy	Communication Numeracy

			Familiarity with technology Familiarity with systems Familiarity with change Personal skills
1990	NCC	Core Skills 16-19: a response to the Secretary of State	Communication Application of Mathematics IT Problem-solving Personal skills Foreign language
1991	BTEC	Common Skills and General Guidelines	Communication Applying numeracy Applying IT Problem-solving Working with others Improving and managing self Design and creativity
1992	NCVQ	GNVQ specifications	Communication (mandatory) Numeracy (mandatory) IT (mandatory) Problem-solving (optional) Personal skills (Optional) Foreign language (Optional)
1993	City & Guilds	GNVQ Specifications Core Skills	Communication Application of number IT Problem-solving Personal skills (improving own learning and performance) Personal skills (working with others)
1996	SCAA (Dearing Report)	Review of qualifications for 16-19-year olds	Communication Application of number IT Problem-solving Team-working Managing own learning
1999	QCA	Introduction to key skills	Communication Application of number IT Problem-solving Improving own learning and performance Working with others

Table I. The list of lists.

A parallel debate about the relative breadth and depth of post-compulsory education had been taking place for a number of years – since the Crowther Report of 1959 in fact, to which the idea of underpinning post-compulsory education with core skills can be traced. In 1988, the Higginson report was published. It recommended learner A-

levels, but more of them, and was backed by the universities and industry lobbyists (CBI, 1989a). The government rejected its findings, but stated its desire to see more movement between A-level and vocational courses, and the incorporation of core skills into all post-16 studies. The core skills issue thus became tied to post-16 curriculum reform and the debate eventually became one of how to deliver key skills at A-level, rather than whether or not they were desirable.

The Dearing Report of 1996 heralded the era of New Labour in government. The report proposed a coherent national framework to cover all post-compulsory achievement and sought to bring the structures of GNVQ and A-level into closer alignment, so that students could build up portfolios of qualifications across both pathways. The report was in part a response to representations from employers and a recognition of the need to build competence in the main skills of:

- communication;
- application of number;
- IT;
- as well as the wider skills of:
- team-working;
- problem-solving;
- managing own learning.

The Dearing Report was a cusp in the evolution of key skills, and in education and training generally. It cogently tied together socio-political philosophy, economic necessity and curriculum reform. It was greatly influenced by Tawney in that it encouraged a high level of achievement in key skills (as a precondition of award) by stressing both socio-economic imperative and personal desirability. It reinforced the central importance of education and training to the prospect of earning a good personal standard of living, and the necessity for society to have an adaptable and well-trained workforce to compete with other economies. The Dearing Report signalled a shift in the economic and social aspirations of the education system – from vocational training for a job, to lifelong learning for employability. It represented a compromise, totally consistent with Tawney, between Britain's traditional liberalism and the more pragmatic 'technicalism' of mainland Europe. Key skills have given practical support to this new integration by representing both a shared element and a shared aspiration within academic and vocational courses.

Emerging Issues

An important issue to emerge from this overview is whether the evolution of key skills is complete or not. Will the list change and under what circumstances?

It seems reasonable to assume that the current list is not immutable. It will not necessarily remain unchanged, but natural inertia is likely to moderate any future desire for radical reform. Furthermore, other skills (such as those associated with cultural awareness, political responsibility or artistic appreciation) may have a claim to inclusion on any future list of desirable outcomes, but such claims are likely to be balanced by a realisation that any formally assessed curriculum must necessarily be finite and that there are resource implications for any institution attempting to enhance its delivery.

Assuming that change does come, it is likely to be influenced by both *internal* factors, such as curriculum overload, assessment difficulties, university admissions procedures and the currency given to the key skills qualification by employers; and *external* economic and political factors, which determine what is regarded as 'key' in terms of employability at any given time. Such influences are unlikely to remain constant in the long term.

In the medium term, the debate will continue as to whether post-16 curriculum reform will ever be fully successful as long as vocational and academic courses are merely aligned, rather than intertwined; and whether the abolition of quality 3-year degrees is a price worth paying for the introduction of baccalaureate style secondary education and the postponement of early specialisation.

Finally, whether the evolution of key skills will ever be complete depends ultimately on whether the National Curriculum delivers the outcomes for which it was designed. The Dearing Report, while alluding to the compensatory nature of key skills, stressed the need for learning to be lifelong, continuous and relevant to work. Whether key skills survive and in what form, will depend on whether this balance is ever achieved.

At first sight, the introduction of the new key skills qualification into the reformed A-level curriculum (from September 2000) would appear to be progressive and consistent with the government's aim to realign academic and vocational learning routes. It is too early to say how successful this has been, but early indications are that the take-up is much higher in FE colleges than in schools, despite the allocation of a university admissions tariff. Some *selecting* universities, as opposed to *recruiting* ones, have openly indicated their intention to ignore it and the response from employer organisations has been muted. Ironically, if this situation was to become embedded, what started out as an bridge between the academic and the vocational may inadvertently become a manifestation of increasing division at both secondary and tertiary levels.

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