

## **5-7 Transferable Skills: “Killed Bin Laden”**

### **Introduction**

Participant 17: I think this is not apocryphal that the [slight laugh]...

Interviewer: [slight laugh]

Participant 17: ...that the [slight laugh] head of the Seal Hit Squad that killed...

Interviewer: Oh yeah [slight laugh] oh yes. [slight laugh]

Participant 17: ...[slight laugh] killed Bin Laden was actually a journalism graduate from the University of Texas, I think that's right?

This graphic example of transferable skills in media studies has a basis in fact and was widely reported in the press as part of the coverage of the US operation to kill Osama Bin Laden in May 2011 (For example, BBC, 2011; Huffington Post, 2011). The participant has conflated Vice Admiral William H McRaven, head of the Joint Special Operations Command in Afghanistan, the overall commander of the operation and journalism graduate with the Navy SEAL unit that actually carried out the killing but the participant successfully portrays the importance of transferable skills as a characterising element of media studies courses.

Writing in 1993, shortly after the binary divide between universities and polytechnics was abolished and before a period of expansion in the provision of media studies courses, Bridges, writing from a philosophical perspective, defined transferable skills:

“The term *transferable skills* tends to be preferred when people are talking about the application of skills across different social contexts. Skills in interpersonal communication, management skills and collaborative group working skills are all perhaps examples of this kind.” (Bridges, 1993, p.45)

This definition significantly demonstrates the evolution of higher education discourse over the time since Bridges was writing. For Bridges, the *transfer* part of *transferable skills* is “*across different social contexts*”. This contrasts with the meaning that can be inferred from the participants’ responses. They now see the *transfer* in *transferable skills* as *across different employment contexts*.

The discourse around ‘*skills*’ for ‘*employability*’ in higher education is characterised by a desire to highlight this aspect of learning as distinct and different from the conventional expectations of a graduate. In their report on the *Case Studies for Advanced Skills and Employability in Higher Education* project, Holmes and Miller (2000, p.655) give a rationale for the project:

“A degree is no longer enough to guarantee employment. Employers are now looking for additional ingredients, which demonstrate that the graduate has not only acquired academic capabilities, but also developed the key skills that will enable a successful and expeditious transition from education into employment.”

This fragment of discourse from the secondary literature contains a number of elements that associate it with a discourse of a dominant ‘*out there in the real world*’ (see Chapter 6, Section 6-7). This is indicated by the assumption that “academic capabilities” cannot expedite a “*transition from education to employment*” and that it is possible for a graduate to possess a degree qualification but not be employable, implying that whatever attributes possession of a degree-level qualification denote, they are not what is required; something is missing. Holmes and Miller (ibid., p.654) illustrate the specific skills concerned by drawing on a key skills initiative at the University of Northumbria that includes; “*managing and applying intellect; self-management; working with others; effective communication; information technology and, use and application of mathematics*”.

This discourse leads to a plethora of institutional initiatives, frameworks and programmes that develop ‘key skills’, ‘transferable skills’, ‘skills for employability’ etc. that can then encounter oppositional discourses. This section of analysis considers the responses from five of the participants in relation to these discourses.

### **Analysis**

Participant 01 is an experienced broadcast journalist and university lecturer, now working within a central teaching and learning directorate.

The other part of it is that a lot of the people who go into media courses are not going to go into the media, [...] and as such, it’s about developing the individual, developing the individual’s knowledge, understanding within an area and they are really transferable skills. And I think that’s one of the key things that any media course; the media courses are delivering hugely transferable skills because of one of their main emphases is the communication skills and every single person in whatever job they have, has to have communication skills if they’re going to be able to articulate what they want to do and all the rest of it. (Participant 01)

Recognising that many media graduates do not enter the media industries, Participant 01 readily uses the term ‘transferable skills’ but it is clear that she sees these skills as much more than the generic key skills identified by Northumbria. This participant points much more towards the value of a media degree course as a means of personal, intellectual development and the overriding importance of communication skills. It is also worth noting the principal reason that the participant gives for the importance of communication skills; “to be able to articulate what they want to do”. This is not part of a ‘real world’, ‘what employers

want' discourse but is better associated with 'empowerment' and 'personal and intellectual development'. This position is confirmed in her next response:

They've learnt to be much more critical, to develop their own persona, their own identities so actually, (...) it has enhanced them as individuals and made them employable for the area that they've then decided, 'Actually, that's where I want to go.' (Participant 01)

Participant 07 and Participant 08 both refer to the term 'transferable skills'.

Participant 07 sees negative associations with the term whilst Participant 08 recognises their role but again refers to personal development ("confidence-building") rather than instrumental workplace skills.

I think it does 'cause there- a-another bad word that's being used is transferable skills and I think they, quite a lot of transferable skills that can be applied to whatever they're going to do in the future. (Participant 07)

And you do have to understand what a CV might mean for different scenarios but actually you know, confidence-building, communication, all those things, and I know you know, the classic transferable skills things. (Participant 08)

Participant 14 disassociates himself from the term by classing it as a "buzz word" and goes on to present a slippery-slope argument that sees transferable skills as a route to 'vocational' technical training, something that would be impossible to deliver well because of resource constraints.

Has skills which are (...) 'transferable' as the, you know, as the- one of the buzz words is (...) but I think it's important that (...) we- universities and colleges don't present themselves as being vocational too specifically because how, you know, how can you (...) unless you've got the same equipment that every single company's got (...) you can't... (Participant 14)

"Teaching people to do a- to do a skill for which there is (...) palpably less call than there was?" (...) If cornered like that I often hear myself (...) replying with the transferability of journalism. (Participant 17)

Participant 17 is more positive if somewhat reluctant. He is speaking specifically about journalism and the perception that, because of technological and economic changes, traditional journalism roles that are often the career goal of journalism students are in decline. This leads him to ambivalently (“*if cornered*”) turn to transferable skills as a rationale for a course that now does not lead to a recognised career path.

Participant 18 expands on the idea that media studies courses naturally develop good communication skills by referring to this as “*telling stories*”, an over-arching appreciation of narrative. He sees this as “*key*” and more significant than technical skills. He then goes on to forcefully assert the significance of these generic skills that go beyond the requirement of any single employment context.

And, in order to teach people how to communicate, and communicating is pretty much telling stories in order to give people that absolutely key, transferable skill, it’s not just the technical skills, it’s all of the context behind it. (Participant 18)

I think it’s morally reprehensible to say “we are training you for this one job, and we’re not giving you that empowering professional flexibility, those kind of transferable skills” (Participant 18)

### ***Summary and Conclusions***

This set of participant responses illustrate the delicate balance that academic staff maintain at the intersection of public and institutional policy discourses and academic discourses. These responses show that the participants readily use the term ‘*transferable skills*’ and its variants but they have appropriated them within their own local, academic discourses and ascribe it a usage at odds with public

policy usage. This enables them to apparently support and promote the notion while maintaining an ideologically distinct stance in their professional practices.

As the responses throughout this Discourses of Identity chapter have shown, individual academic identity and collective subject identity are challenged by public discourses around the nature and purpose of higher education in general with specific challenges for media academic and media studies. In response to these challenges, the participants demonstrate the use of oppositional, balancing discursive practices that counter what could be seen (Williams, 2012a) as hegemonic neo-liberal ideation.