

Meta-skills: exciting opportunity or neo-liberal retread?

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Abstract

The term Meta-skills has become prominent in education in the last decade and, in Scotland, has increasingly been seen at the forefront of policy agendas. Based on the idea of Metacognition, and so claiming to derive from evidence of Psychology and Cognitive Science, the Meta-skills concept seems to offer an exciting and quintessentially 21st century opportunity. Or does it? Is the idea coherent and evidence-based? Indeed, is it new or merely a rebranding of those key/core/transferable/soft skills that have been contested since the 1980s? Does it represent a further neo-liberal strategy to vocationalise education, prioritising making learners 'ready for the market'? This paper asks what are Meta-skills and what do they have to offer (or threaten) to those working in adult education?

Key words: adult education, Meta-skills, training, neo-liberalism, community learning, employment.

Introduction

The term 'Meta-skills' is relatively new, emerging in the 1990s (Hall and Mirvis, 1995), but it is in the last decade that interest has increased exponentially, with not only dozens of academic articles, but also prominence in government policy. As Stephen, Muir and Hall (2020:1) say 'Used as a buzzword in work-based learning literature, the idea of 'metaskills' seems to be an increasingly important part of lifelong learning'. Perhaps this is not surprising, given the claims of its proponents such as Eyre (2020):

[Meta-skills] underpin employability ... magnify and activate other skills ... are most likely to support an individual's adaptability and resilience can embody broader conceptions of the skills needed to access a good life.

If such is indeed the case, then the Scottish Government could be congratulated for being one of the first to acknowledge Meta-skills in its strategies. Their 2021 Future Skills: Action Plan (Scottish Government, 2021) states:

The Scottish Government acknowledges... that ...to adapt to a changing and uncertain economic and technological landscape, individuals will need to develop their skills and adapt, perhaps on multiple occasions' and includes 'Key actions', the 4th of which is 'to develop and promote a clear definition of meta-skills, the timeless, higher-order skills that create adaptive learners'.

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) is identified as being responsible for implementation.

What are Meta-skills?

There seems to be confusion over what the term actually means, with no two definitions the same, and many being incompatible. Stephen, Muir and Hall (2020:1) reviewed 210 scholarly journals and found two distinct types of definition: one, a shorthand for 'metacognitive skill'; the second, a broader 'higher order' technical skill type.

The first of these has a lineage embedded in Cognitive Science and Psychology, tracing its origins to the 1970s, with the term Metacognition coined by John Flavell in 1976 (Zhai et al, 2023). Drigas et al (2023:4) summarise this strand, defining Metacognition as 'the set of regulatory meta-abilities and meta-skills that learners consciously apply to regulate cognitive and psychophysiological operations', structured on eight pillars: Metacognitive Knowledge;

Applied metaknowledge; Self-observation; Self-regulation; Adaptability; Recognition; Discrimination; Mnemosyne. Even allowing for variations in terminology, their model shows virtually no commonality between the Metacognition and SDS versions of Meta-skills described below.

The second strand identified by Stephen et al (2020) is the broader 'higher order' technical skill type, exemplified by the SDS Skills 4.0 (SDS 2018:8), where Meta-skills are described as follows:

The timeless, higher order skills that create adaptive learners and promote success in whatever context the future brings. These are the skills that enable individuals to perform highly today.

The SDS Skills 4.0 plan is visionary: the 'exponential change' inherent in the '4th industrial revolution' ushers in 'the performance economy': 'expectations of "peak performance are fast becoming the new norm for work and living'. (SDS, 2018:4).

It is in this context that Meta-skills are presented as a solution to the question of how to increase productivity, derived not from Psychology or Cognitive Science, but from the needs of the marketplace. As presented in Skills 4.0 (SDS, 2018) there are 12 skills organised under 3 headings:

- Self-Management (focusing, integrity, adapting, initiative)
- Social Intelligence (communicating, feeling, collaborating, leading)
- Innovation (curiosity, creativity, sense making, critical thinking).

Critique

I suggest that the notion of Meta-skills, both in theory and practice, is flawed, and offer four arguments to support this assertion: firstly, that it is largely a rebranding of existing ideas; secondly, that there is little empirical evidence that such skills are transferable or have the relevance claimed; thirdly, that it is a confused concept with little coherence; fourthly, it represents a further move towards employer-dominated education, driven by a neo-liberal ideology.

Critique 1: Old wine in new bottles

In the 1980s the new Thatcher government's ideological neo-liberal policies had a deep impact on education, typified by the Youth Training Scheme (YTS). This 'New Vocationalism' prioritised employers, and the need to prepare young people for the job market, thereby challenging traditional liberal educational values. As Kelly (2001:5) puts it, there was a continued debate:

... between two contrasting models of education: The sociocentric model, which coupled education with training and whose primary purpose was to produce economic prosperity. [and] 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.

As the industrial landscape changed dramatically at the end of the twentieth century, the labour market also changed rapidly. Policymakers scrambled to adapt traditional, and increasingly outmoded, training practices: the new neo-liberal economic model required the co-opting of education to serve the needs of industry, and so the sociocentric model came to dominate. With

it, ideas about training and education were radically altered. It was in this context that we see the origins of today's Meta-skills.

The origins of core skills in the UK clearly lie in vocational education and training, with the earliest work on core skills leading to the influential 1985 report *Core Skills in YTS* (Hart and Howieson, 2008:8).

Tribe (1996:13) goes as far as saying that 'at the beginning of the 1990s core skills seemed to be the panacea for post-16 education'.

We can see an evolution of the idea of these transferable, generic skills originating in the YTS scheme. The actual composition of these skills changed over time, with infighting between Government departments and Employers' groups. In 2001, six key skills were recognised (Kelly, 2001: 21):

- communication; • application of number; • information technology; working with others; •improving own learning and performance; • problem-solving.

But Kelly also notes that slightly earlier versions had included 'Values and Integrity', 'Personal Skills', 'Personal Relationships' and 'Dealing with Change'. It is interesting to note how closely these Core Skills from 1989-91 map onto the 'new' Meta-skills:

Of the twelve 'new' Meta-skills, four correspond directly to Core/Key skills (Integrity/Values and Integrity; Adapting/ Dealing with Change; Communicating /Communication; Collaborating / Working with others) and the other eight can easily be included in Core/Key Skills (Focusing in 'improving own learning and performance'; Feeling, Curiosity and Creativity in 'Personal Skills'; Leading in 'Working with others'; Sense making and Critical Thinking in 'Problem Solving'.

That is, these much-heralded ‘new’ Meta-skills could have easily been presented using the same framework as that used for Core/Key skills 30 years ago. The emphasis might change, with a greater stress on some, in recognition of changes in culture and work environments, but the essential nature of the skills list is unchanged. The new term is, in marketing terms, a relaunch, a rebranding of an outdated product.

Critique 2: A '**spurious transferability**'

One of the important claims of the proponents of Meta-skills (and its forerunners: key/core skills) is that they are transferrable, that they are of a ‘higher order’, so facilitate the development of other skills. However, many doubts have been raised about, firstly, whether such skills are indeed so transferrable from one situation or context to another; secondly, whether such transferability is indeed what the job market requires. 'It is also highly questionable whether employers do actually need transferable skills' as opposed to specific occupational skills (Canning, 2007:143). Canning also states (2007:144) that 'one of the few empirical studies into the acquisition of Key/Core skills suggests that soft skills are better learned on-the-job' rather than in education.

Touloumakis (2020) gives detailed examples of how so-called transferable ‘soft-skills’ such as Meta-skills cannot be viewed adequately outside of the specific situation in which they are used: for instance, an individual’s ‘active listening’ behaviours in one context could be seen as their failure to make decisions in another. She concludes that such skills cannot simply be decontextualised in the way that their proponents suggest.

Such ideas had led Kelly (2001:22) to state that 'substantial and coherent arguments have been raised against what some see as a wasteful ‘chimera hunt’ in pursuit of spurious transferability'.

Critique 3: “When I use a word ... it means just what I choose it to mean ...” Lewis Carroll *Alice in Wonderland*

We should also remind ourselves that Core/Key/Meta-Skills are socially constructed. They have, therefore, been created to serve the interests of those who created them. Nevertheless, some Meta-skills proponents seem to claim otherwise; that the term is rooted in the study of Metacognition in Cognitive Science and Psychology. However, as argued above, there is no correspondence between these ideas and Meta-skills.

There are also claims that Meta-skills have been developed from studies of the changing job market. However, examination of the most significant of these shows that they are less definitive about their conclusions than Skills Development Scotland suggest. For instance Bakhshi (2017:22), referred to as evidence in Skills 4.0 (SDS, 2018), states they are only aware of a 'handful of academic studies' relevant to such skills, while Spencer and Lucas (2021), in a comprehensive literature review that was commissioned by SDS to inform their work on Meta-skills, examined 37 different frameworks that displayed remarkably few similarities.

Furthermore, the term ‘skill’ itself is contested and has been stretched to include characteristics and personal characteristics:

Meta-skills is just one word of many used to describe these wider skills. Terms include attributes, capabilities, character, competences, dispositions, habits, non-cognitive skills, soft skills, transferable skills, transversal skills, twenty-first century-skills and wider skills. (Spencer and Lucas, 2021:4)

Many of these are not really ‘skills’ at all:

... ‘skill’ has expanded almost exponentially to include a veritable galaxy of ‘soft’, ‘generic’, ‘transferable’, ‘social’ and ‘interactional’ skills, frequently indistinguishable from personal characteristics, behaviours and attitudes, which in the past would rarely have been conceived of as skill. (Payne, 2000:254)

Finally, some of the rhetoric around Meta-skills is less than coherent. For instance, they are described as ‘innate, timeless’ (SDS, 2021 p3) – terms that are inappropriate in relation to abilities which have the potential to be developed. Insofar as the term ‘innate’ refers to qualities that are present from birth, then it applies more to inherent disposition than to competences that can be learned.

Critique 4 “ ...education leaders at all levels must commit to new policy solutions that offer early exposure and access to career-oriented experiences” Wise and Siddiqi (2022: 2)

The fourth critique is that the Meta-Skills initiative represents a further attempt to dominate education by the interests of business, and to erode the values of traditional adult education in the interests of a neo-liberal agenda. Neo-liberalism, 'the dominant discourse in Western democracies' (Bray and MacLellan, 2019:3), is defined here as an ideology based on the primacy of the marketplace in all spheres of life, thereby converting public goods, such as education, into ‘consumption goods’ (Mayo, 2003; Frazer, 2018). It is 'an extreme form of capitalism which conceives the “market” as the sole arbiter of success or failure' (Petrie 2024:2).

There are a multitude of examples in the literature of calls for business to have ever greater control over education. The quote from Wise and Siddiqi above is representative, and they go on to state (2022:2) 'Specifically, many have called for greater alignment between education

systems and the workforce'. It is not surprising that Brynner (2017:61) notes "A policy shift is revealed towards dominance of the 'economic' over the 'wider' (social and well-being) learning goals."

The SDS (2018:5) Skills 4.0 document makes explicit that its underlying purpose is to 'enhance productivity and address potential labour market shortages' and Spencer and Lucas (2021:29) comment on it: 'Where non-productivity outcomes are mentioned, they are still in support of productivity.'

What are the implications for the practice of community-based adult education? Seen in a wider context, it represents further demands to vocationalise provision. As Nicholson (2024:1) puts it:

From August 2024 the new term of 'Tailored Learning' will be adopted [and] suggests a neo-liberal political ideology and strengthens the current argument that adult learning which is paid for by the state should be for employment purposes, or a stepping-stone to employment only.

He goes on (p6) 'many academics and educators have continued to voice concerns about the shift towards adult education being increasingly focused on the development of economic capital'.

Furthermore, Scottish Government (2021) Future Skills theme 4.3 claims:

We will strengthen community-based adult learning provision, promoting greater collaboration between colleges and local authorities to create clear pathways for retraining and upskilling.

To what extent does this imply that all community-based adult education will have to be seen to have overt, explicit employability outcomes? Will any form of Adult Education that is not explicitly and primarily about ‘making up for the Meta-skills deficit’ and getting learners ‘market ready’ be at a disadvantage, whether they are programmes for leisure, health, mental well-being or social cohesion? The tradition of democratic citizenship education may be further sidelined by the focus on education for jobs and the economy.

Conclusion: 'To speak a true word is to transform the world' (Paulo Freire 2005, 85).

The term ‘Meta-skills’ is a social construct, created for socio-political purposes with little correspondence to underlying cognitive processes. Its introduction marks a rebranding of key/core/transferable skills, first introduced in the 1980s as part of a neo-liberal political agenda to vocationalise education.

For adult education, this is the ongoing political reality. As Shah (2020:18) says the 'social purpose of adult education that existed prior to the 1980s has been undermined by successive governments under a learning economy hegemony, premised upon an economic imperative'. Based as it is on a deficit model of learning (that individuals lack these Meta-skills and must be made to learn them), the Meta-skills approach can be seen as opposed to the basic values of Adult Education (CLD Standards Council, 2022).

However, despite such initiatives, Adult Education will continue to support all learners: those seeking employment, those wanting to change employment and those who want to learn for many other reasons. Meta-skills will probably fade from memory, but enduring Adult Education values of empowerment, equality and social justice will remain our priorities.

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