

Skill

Miriam Bartha

The OED defines "skill" as the "capability of accomplishing something with precision and certainty," the "ability to perform a function, acquired or learnt with practice;" hence, "practical knowledge;" or "expertness." As a noun, skill is a precipitate of past actions in training or in practice that further indicates the ability or capacity to put knowledge into practice, to implement a form of knowledge performatively and effectively, to operationalize it within particular contexts. It is "savoir-faire," the French compound verb that means "to know [how] to do."

In common usage, "skill" often indicates applied or applicable knowledge, as distinct from more abstract, academic, theoretical (or trivial) knowledge. In contradistinction to the word "knowledge," "skill" tends to highlight instrumental use value. While scholarly and vocational training both claim to impart "knowledge and skill," each term is given different relative value in different fields. In some areas, the utilitarian emphasis in "skill" is positively valued. Examples include business, public affairs, and other professional fields, the

fine and performing arts (with an emphasis on technique), and to some extent, the social sciences, where "research skills and methods" play a central role in professional training. In the humanities, in contrast, scholarly identities are most often conceived and developed in terms of subject and content knowledge, rather than performative skills. Consequently, the discourse of "skills" figures only marginally in advanced graduate education and professional training. Discussions of skill are instead relegated to "functional" service domains like language learning and composition. In critical discussions, they are frequently and pejoratively associated with technologies and cultures of management, an instrumentalization of knowledge, and an educational culture that uncritically reproduces workers.

Skill is less a structuring term for cultural studies research discussions than an "unacknowledged keyword" internal to its thematic inquiries and professional contexts (Burgett and Hendler, 2007). Many of the keywords that constellate around skill—"labor," "work," "profession," "management," "industry," and "technology"—constitute subjects of scholarly inquiry within cultural studies, in the US and elsewhere. Skill is closely tied to the language of "experience," "expertise," "education" and "practice." It is joined to the

transformation of labor under the rise of industrial and organizational management and the educational enculturation for it, and hence to a changing knowledge economy and ecology. Here “skill” engages the rubrics of cultural work and professional development and joins contemporary discussions about the relationship of the university to other knowledge-producing sectors. “Skill” is today entwined with the workings of power and knowledge in evolving forms of labor, industry, and education.

An earlier, now obsolete meaning for “skill” given in the OED is “An art or science.” In his keyword entries on “Art” and “Science” in *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, Raymond Williams notes that an earlier meaning of skill as an art or science referenced a historical moment in which art and science were not functionally disarticulated as ways of knowing and doing. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, practical divisions of labor and knowledge emerged as Western societies, states, and empires evolved the more extensive forms of political, social, and economic administration associated with modernity, as well as corresponding philosophical orientations.

Modern distinctions between science and art, practical and theoretical knowledge, began to appear in the seventeenth century, as Laura

Briggs observes in her keyword entry on “Science” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. Throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, natural philosophers consolidated claims to know the world empirically, through the systematic investigation of universal laws. The attribution of rationality and objectivity to science elevated it in a hierarchy of knowledge, and opposed it to the subjectivity that was henceforth associated with “art,” a separate realm of endeavor with its own internal distinctions. Indeed, the rise of science informed the division of knowledge into subjects bound by rules of investigation. Both art and science came to describe subdivided domains including the liberal, fine, and mechanical arts as well as the natural, social, and human sciences. These divisions informed the modernization of the university and the institutionalization of the disciplines at the turn of the last century.

This disciplinary division of knowledge was tied to transformations of work and class in the same period. Traditional knowledge and skill mastery had been inculcated through apprenticeship to restrictive craft guilds. With the scientific and industrial revolutions, capitalist interests sought to displace craft workers’ knowledge of and control over the labor process. Scientific management—also known as

Taylorism—led a movement to rationalize, reorganize, and standardize production (Taylor, 1911). By analyzing skilled craft labor, and appropriating and monopolizing that knowledge, scientific management systematically redistributed, prescribed, and monitored specific tasks for optimal efficiency and profit.

Where conception and execution had once been unified in the embodied actions of the skilled craft worker, Taylorism sought to divide mental and manual labor in order to consolidate conception and control within management, while simplifying, specializing, and standardizing the actions performed by industrial workers. Taylorism disaggregated human technique and reformed it in an industrial technology that subsumed workers to automated processes and machinery. Twentieth-century labor leaders and organic intellectuals from Samuel Gompers to Harry Braverman critiqued the degradation of labor and laborers that resulted, a process that came to be referred to as “deskilling” (Burawoy, 1985; Jacoby, 1998). But the interventions of scientific management also meant that the knowledge and autonomy historically associated with the skilled craft worker came to inform the cultural capital, privileges, and aspirations attached to a new class of professionals.

Whether or not the separation of conception and execution ever achieved the outcomes claimed (a matter of some debate), the ideological acceptance of scientific management—efficiency, quality control, speed-up—supported the growth of a professional-managerial class and of a formal education system. Movements for universal mass education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries responded to changing workforce needs in a variety of ways. By delaying youth entry into the workforce, expanding education requirements reduced competition between unskilled and semi-skilled workers. At the same time, expanded education provided training in the analytical and conceptual skills required by scientific management.

The status and value of skills, the ability to claim and deploy them as human capital, are thus central stakes in the dynamic and contested organization of modern labor and knowledge. In the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the creative destruction associated with capitalist, globalized competition has resulted in the deskilling or outright displacement of workers whose jobs are rearticulated or replaced within new management and technological regimes. At the same time, continual change has demanded new skills and created new opportunities for professional, managerial, and

technical workers capable of meeting those demands.

Credentialization through higher and higher levels of formal education has become naturalized as the condition of professional entry and mobility. Where undergraduate education once served this function, in many fields in the post-industrial United States, some form of graduate education is increasingly seen as the prerequisite to professional standing and middle-class career prospects (St. John et al, 2009). At the same time, debates about the “overproduction” of PhDs and the jobs crisis in many disciplinary fields—especially the humanities—suggest that credentials cannot assure this function. In these fields, the common university practice of employing graduate students to teach undergraduates—particularly basic skills and service courses—has had the paradoxical effect of cultivating doctoral students’ teaching skills while increasing competition and reducing employment opportunities for doctorates who have acquired those skills. Thus the trend towards flexible, contingent contract labor has de-professionalized, if not de-skilled, the services of the university’s teaching faculty (Bousquet, 2008).

These logics have played out more broadly in the so-called New Economy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as

investment and management demands for flexibility and innovation pressure professionals in much the same way that an earlier industrial moment pressured skilled and semi-skilled trade workers. Technology and global competition have combined such that “speed-up”—a term associated with the intensification of Taylorism in the Fordist assembly line—is now common reference in the knowledge and creative industries, where white-collar and “no-collar” workers must undertake continual, diversified, post-professional education, “reskilling” and “upskilling” to remain competitive in the labor market (Liu, 2004; Martin, 2007; Ross, 2003 and 2009).

Humanities education occupies a particular position in this history, and in the present conjuncture. The academic humanities have defined themselves as an institution apart from state and industrial interests, and in reaction to the industrial-scientific rationality that informs the dominant managerial discourse on skills. The classical curriculum of the nineteenth-century humanities drew value from a precapitalist, aristocratic past, and created a deliberate distance from the pragmatic, technical, and vocational education of the industrial classes. Within the modern education system, the humanities were consequently encoded as a disinterested, universal form of

knowledge *opposed* to technological, instrumental, and applied knowledge encoded as skill. In the twentieth century Leavisite literary studies in Britain and the New Critical school (heirs to the Southern Agrarians) in the United States exemplified this tendency, but shared with other humanities fields a focus on auratic artworks, an education in taste intended to transcend mass culture and the everyday.

As consequence, the humanities identify most strongly with critical thinking and research skills, and regard ambivalently their identification with more basic and functional language and literacy skills. The present-day distance of the academic humanities from the practical questions, discussions, and investments currently shaping public policy and advanced technology are one result of this historical self-understanding of the humanities as advancing *disinterested* knowledge, even as this assumption has given way under critiques advanced by cultural studies, feminist studies, postcolonial and ethnic studies, and other recent knowledge projects challenging universalized knowledge claims. By contrast, the articulation of the social sciences to both government and business—and to community/activist engagements with such institutions—has facilitated different kinds of transits between academic

study and applied practice (Clawson et al, 2007; Hale, 2008)

Yet, while the academic humanities deemphasize skills training as such, histories of the professional-managerial New Class suggest the intimate importance of humanities *values* to its formation, self-concept, and aspirational horizons (Ehrenreich, 1989; Newfield 2003). As part of the university curriculum that shapes the New Class, the humanities act to preserve craft values of creativity and autonomy—freedom and imagination—condensed in the figure of “nice work,” defined as work that fulfills human development as well as economic imperatives. Business has responded to these more utopian visions of work in recent decades with various forms of enlightened management that advocate humane workplaces, collaboration, and flat (non-hierarchical) organization, even as employment has become increasingly precarious and insecure, boundaries between work and leisure eroded, and work hours more extended (Ross, 2003; Liu, 2004).

These changes to the workplace have reshaped the university at the same time that knowledge-producing sectors have multiplied and diversified, indexing higher education’s productivity while undermining the university’s claim to monopolize research, education, and culture (Gibbons, 1994; Ang 1999). Neoliberal

policies have reduced state funding to higher education while encouraging private-sector partnership and for-profit development. The consequences have highlighted and shifted universities' pre-existing economic dependencies; introduced into the university new management regimes and productivity measures focused on outside funding and internal efficiency; and forced a rearticulation of the university's relations to both private and public sectors. "Knowledge transfer"—in the specific sense of cross-sectoral collaboration to generate and exploit intellectual property—has become a university watchword and institutional mandate. At the same time, an emphasis on "transferable skills"—skills that facilitate transit from one employment sector to another—has entered the discourse of professional development in academia.

Located within this historical genealogy, the so-called crisis of the humanities might be better understood as a crisis of the concept of "skill" within the *academic* humanities, a particular professional sector. Its symptomatic job crisis—the disproportionate numbers of Ph.D. students graduated compared to the number of full-time tenure track positions that have justified Ph.D. training programs—challenges the guild apprenticeship mode of disciplinary (as opposed to professional) graduate education

(Humanities Indicators Prototype, 2009; Nerad and Cerny, 2000). And it gives urgency to the question of what professional capacities—what skills—graduate programs are training their students for, in and beyond the university.

The notion of "transferable skills" common to discourses of career counseling, human resources, and professional development, responds to this job crisis by highlighting the movement among professional sectors that skills can provide, playing them up as a convertible form of educated capital investment. Strategic engagement with this discourse would specify the skills frequently generalized as "research," "teaching," and "service;" reconceive them as forms of *practiced* knowledge (as opposed to area knowledge); and evaluate and articulate their utility to other sectors. While this approach promises direct benefits for scholars who need to find professional employment in other sectors, it also facilitates transdisciplinary collaboration and partnership, enlarging the spheres in which cultural knowledge circulates and becomes operational (Rudd et al, 2008; Graybill et al, 2006; Nerad, 2000).

Yet the discourse of transferable skills is premised on an abstraction of skills that equates contexts. As a consequence, it obscures another key aspect of job acquisition: the social networks that also facilitate entry into professional

employment, which training programs are also designed to provide. Academic labor organizers have critiqued the deployment of “transferable skills” as an expedient administrative answer to the university system’s inability to employ the doctorates it graduates. Recognizing that professional development has multiple social contexts forces a more thoroughgoing reassessment of the kinds of preparation and support graduate programs provide. In addition to more diversified skill and knowledge development, humanities graduate programs may need to build more intentional relations with diverse professional mentorship networks and opportunities.

As we move toward the future, we might also circle back on the history offered here to resist the equation of skill with professionalization and remember its vernacular contexts. In some areas, this resistance suggests alternative vocabularies, including that of “practice” and “competency.” As cultural studies has documented so well, informal institutions and community formations cultivate context-specific skills and knowledge, and historically professional formations have installed themselves by appropriating and then monopolizing them. The medical professionalization of obstetrics through the displacement of midwives in the nineteenth-century is one

well-known example; the professionalization of historians through the exclusion of non-academic versions pursued by local historical societies and family genealogists would be another (Poovey, 1986; Klein, 2005)

Reorienting professional scholarly practice toward collaborative, community-based engagement requires rethinking and displacing the value hierarchies implicit in distinctions between professional and amateur, work and leisure, art and science. Community-based arts practice, for instance, has elaborated extensive methods for bringing together professional and community forms of expertise, surfacing and developing skills, critical insights, and creative capacities within the group that temper, revise, and exceed possessive professional identities (Korza et al, 2005). In all these cases, bridging academic and non-academic sectors requires recognizing the conceptual utility and limits of skills as a discourse, as well as the different values indexed by and attributed to skills across various domains.

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