Professional behaviours are among the most difficult skills and attributes to teach – compassion in a healthcare student, a conscientious approach to health and safety in a trainee engineer; the capacity for teamworking in a catering apprentice.

Yet the emphasis on teaching and assessing professional behaviours (PBs) has never been greater – partly due to reforms in vocational education, T levels and apprenticeships.

Colin Bentwood, managing director of the Strategic Development Network, was involved in the apprenticeship reforms.

He explains: “The new apprenticeship standard is made up of three elements – knowledge, skills and professional behaviours. These will be assessed in an end test. It has to infer competency in all three.

“In the old apprenticeship it was pass or fail – now they are graded and the thing that makes the difference between the grades will be the professional behaviours.

“All trainee hairdressers may be able to cut hair to a certain standard, but the person who leaves the salon feeling like they have had a complete experience is where the difference will be.”

Mike Cox, business development director at the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), envisages challenges in trying to fit PBs into what he describes as a “fairly restricted curriculum which doesn’t have time for them”.

“If they are spending a day on professional behaviours, it is a day lost in teaching the standard,” says Cox.

He says some employers might not see the value in PBs, but “as a training provider you are going to have to explain that to them”. He adds: “There may also be professional behaviours that a good training provider and employer would like to add to those that are in not in the standard.”

The role of employers in assessing and delivering PBs was flagged as essential by every contributor to this article.

Dr Ellen Spencer is senior researcher at the Centre for Real-World Learning at Winchester University and co-author of a paper, Remaking Apprenticeships – Powerful Learning for Work and Life. “Close communication between teachers and organisations is necessary if the outcomes are to remain relevant,” she says.

Ruth Gilbert, chief executive of the Career Colleges Trust, agrees. Her organisation, which is involved in consultation on the T level development with the Department for Education, is helping to ensure that employers are involved in assessing behaviours.

“Our charity engages employers in master classes, workplace visits and live business projects to ensure learners build behaviours in context,” she says.

A poll, commissioned by The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award scheme last year, found that 95 per cent of 500 UK senior managers regard professional behaviours as equally or more important than exam
results. And 98 per cent recommended that young people invest more time enhancing these skills.

Jane Simister, author of the Character, Grit & Resilience Pocketbook and co-author of two reports linked to PBs, believes this kind of work is vital, and calls these skills “character”.

“They are those attributes that help people thrive in the face of change, challenge and opportunity,” Simister says. “Whether you want to be a baker or a financial services professional, the apprenticeship standards reveal a significant overlap in the qualities considered to be helpful.

“While we might hope that such traits come naturally, all sorts of influences come into play – upbringing, early experiences, people we meet.”

Simister, who has spent the past six years developing strategies to improve the quality of learning through the “fostering of habits of mind such as initiative, curiosity, resilience, and focus”, believes education can reduce the ‘chance’ factor.

“Most of these techniques can be adapted to suit all sorts of subjects and levels,” she says. John Boocock, project manager of driver training provider Fleetmaster, says that the environment and culture of individual companies will influence professional behaviours.

Boocock, whose company has 164 trainers, says. “You may have a company where behaviours are nurtured, but if it is a company where every penny is fought over you could get shortcuts.

“The attitude of the learners can be pretty poor because of the way they have been taught and managed.”

Tim Jacklin, head of aviation at Newcastle Aviation
Academy (NAA), has long put PBs at the heart of his teaching. “Positive engagement and appropriate conduct are reinforced throughout in realistic environments and task-driven scenarios,” he says.

“Learners are exposed to meetings with senior representatives, industry experts, MPs and dignitaries. This builds confidence and allows learners to practise conversing using appropriate language, manners and respect.”

He adds: “The aviation industry is one of the most tightly regulated in the world. Honesty, integrity, respect, diligence and trustworthiness are the cornerstones.”

But the drive towards these skills is also accelerated by the speed of technological change. As the World Economic Forum has highlighted, there is greater emphasis on developing learners who are resilient and adaptive.

So what PBs are necessary, and are they the same as competencies? Gilbert says: “We don’t all use the same referencing. My litmus test is do employers consider learners work-ready?”

“This tends to require both subject-specialist knowledge – competencies – and professional behaviours, demonstrating understanding of work etiquette, such as communication and industry-specific requirements, which could also be deemed competencies.”

For Spencer it is about “developing business-like attitudes” in learners, and these are not the same as competencies. “Employers differ considerably in what they consider to be business-like and it will vary depending upon the occupation,” she says. “Some will require basic self-organisation, appropriate dress, timekeeping. Others will value creativity depending upon the occupation,” she says. “Some will value flexibility of mind? ‘Some areas will be more prone to bias. If it is assessing, say, compassion in a healthcare student there is potential for even more bias. The assessor has to be mindful of that bias.”

Jane Simister hints at a greater level of reflection required. “Assessments could include teacher observations, evaluations of learner portfolios, or the dynamic assessment of learners’ performance in novel and demanding situations.”

This raises issues for Bentwood, from the Strategic Development Network, who says: “The challenge for the person doing the observation, who has been providing a base, but the teaching of PBs provides new challenges.

Spencer, chief executive of the Career Colleges Trust, says that not all teachers know how best to engage learners in PBs, and that many require support to help them engage with employers.

She is also concerned about the increasing pressure PBs place on teachers. “I don’t believe most teachers ‘signed up’ to be ‘enterprise’ or ‘work skills’ experts,” she says.

“Current industry practitioners are best placed to guide on workplace competencies required.”

Richard Hamer, education and skills director at BAE Systems, says the emphasis is on teachers to remain current regarding industry PBs, and “exhibit those behaviours whether it be our own staff, training staff or training providers”.

He says that BAE Systems rotates training staff into the workplace and then back into training to keep them up to date with changes in the industry.

Jane Simister hints at a greater level of reflection required. “Assessments could include teacher observations, evaluations of learner portfolios, or the dynamic assessment of learners’ performance in novel and demanding situations.”

This raises issues for Bentwood, from the Strategic Development Network, who says: “The challenge for the person doing the observation, who has been doing things their own way for years, is doing it in an objective way. “Some areas will be more prone to bias. If it is assessing, say, compassion in a healthcare student there is potential for even more bias. The assessor has to be mindful of that bias.”

A study in the School of Medical Sciences, at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, found that among the reasons teachers assessing PBs were reluctant to fail medical students was their “concern for the subjectivity of one’s judgement”. It led to a strategy which included supporting teachers in assessing PBs, and students lacking these skills being offered individual support to practise them.

Simister admits that measuring and assessment is “a much trickier business”.

“It is extraordinarily difficult to create a fair, balanced way of doing this, and it raises ethical questions about our right and ability to even attempt to evaluate another person in this way,” she says. “The most effective ways forward are likely to involve teachers as coaches, helping to raise young people’s awareness of the range of attributes that will boost their chances of success and fostering reflective discussions.

“The last thing anyone would want is to reduce something genuinely meaningful to another set of tick-boxes.”

FURTHER READING

- The World Economic Forum report on PB-related skills is available at goo.gl/9eCK6z