

Towards 'employability 3.0': from practice to praxis

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Abstract

In addition to higher learning, universities are expected to also 'do' employability and help students transition from education to employment. Accordingly, a wide range of approaches have emerged and we, as academics, dedicate substantial efforts to designing and implementing attractive employability offerings for our degree programmes.

We spend considerably less time (and have considerably less time to spend) reflecting on whether these provisions are truly transformational. Brazilian philosopher and educator, Paulo Freire, argued that this transformation can only be achieved through praxis. As a combination of action and reflection into an act of radical agency, praxis is authentic at both the individual and social level. Praxis is the self-determined creation of one's own future, while accepting accountability to fellow human beings.

In this opinion piece, we contend that praxis should be placed at the heart of employability of the future – employability 3.0. We propose that employability 3.0 should incorporate, but also go beyond current best practices such as cross-curriculum 'connectedness' and the 'embeddedness' of community of practice learning. It should be a programme of active learning and reflection which enables students to rewrite their futures by improving their wellbeing, employment prospects and place in society.

Key words: employability; community of practice; connectedness; organisational learning; praxis.

Introduction

Research-led learning is central to our Russell Group institution's undergraduate degree programme, which we jointly teach. Reflection is also a staple part of our assessment strategy, with students frequently evaluating their academic and workplace performance, individual and group work, successes, and mistakes. We facilitate learning and practice through careful student socialisation and transfer of knowledge within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), with members inside and outside of the institution: external partners, other universities, and business incubators. Although we share this approach with several other UK universities, and although this enables us to signal best practice in achieving graduate outcomes, we feel this is not yet a complete outline of employability of the future. In this opinion piece, we briefly consider how employability 2.0 (Bridgstock, 2020) is currently implemented by universities, and show how Brazilian philosopher and educator, Paulo Freire's (1972), radical notion of *praxis* can help us move forward.

Is 'doing' employability enough?

Advance HE, a British higher education sector charity and professional membership scheme, has been tracking a steady increase in employability scholarship. Ranging from conceptual framings of employability (Fung, 2017) to case studies of best practice (Norton and Dalrymple, 2020), there has been a proliferation of published studies –187 between 2012 and 2016 (Artess et al., 2017), and a three-fold increase to 580 over the 2016 - 2021 period (Dalrymple et al., 2021). The established and generally accepted approach to 'doing' employability currently places the onus on individual practices and seeks to encourage a trajectory of personal development towards aspirational job outcomes (Tholen, 2015). This is enabled by the external environment (e.g. labour market conditions) and access to social capital (e.g. personal connections, alumni networks) (Rees, 2021). However, those factors can also serve as barriers to employment, and employability scholars have been instrumental in highlighting issues with persistent graduate unemployment and employment traps in precarious work (Menon et al., 2018).

Researchers have also expressed concerns about employability practices. For instance, these practices have been described as supporting neoliberal performance management initiatives, such as the UK's teaching excellence framework (TEF), as well as research and impact quality audits aimed at improving efficiency and adding value (Hall, 2019). Scholars have argued that employability provisions have been deficient in accounting for a range of diverse student backgrounds (Lockett and Naicker, 2016), or protecting students from exploitation (in cases where student internships are used to gain free labour) (Morrison, 2020). Such readings regard employability initiatives as being predominantly about 'getting to the front of the queue' (DfE, 2021, p.23) and graduate outcomes, rather than lifelong learning aimed at attaining a range of critical skills and experiences (Scott and Willison, 2021).

One way of remedying this is to shift the focus away from graduate outcomes and towards developing the skills and experiences which enable those outcomes. This, according to Paulo Freire (1972), is not only a better pedagogic approach, but can allow students to lead better and more fulfilling lives. What is more, Freire advocated that learning in all its forms should go beyond a transactional exchange, in which academics feel their purpose is to 'pour' knowledge and experience into learners who, in turn, must 'absorb' it. Instead, learning is an intentional process of ongoing reflection and action, enabled by critical thinking and supported by moral values in the service of social justice. It is only through reflection and action that learners can lead a life of self-determination, that is, a life of praxis (see, for example, Gadotti, 1996; Smith, 2011). Yet, praxis is not simply practice, or action. Action for its own sake can single-mindedly repeat past mistakes and reproduce existing inequalities. Neither is praxis an over-reliance on reflection, which, without action, is 'verbalism' or 'idle chatter' (Freire, 1972, p. 68). Indeed, both must be present for an individual to achieve separation from their immersive circumstances, and through this, the distance and perspective (De Castro, 2015), required for self-improvement (see, for example, Smith, 2011).

Current higher education contexts have required universities to busy themselves in the 'doing' of employability, for instance, by putting in place interventions to improve student performance and build 'career capital' (Kozhevnikov, 2021). However, we believe that Freire would challenge us to move employability discourses further, from 'practice' and towards 'praxis', with the purpose of enabling students to overcome socio-cultural barriers

and oppressions, towards rewriting their future and not just 'reproducing the past' (Giroux, 2011, p. 716). The question is, has employability scholarship and the advent of 'employability 2.0' (Bridgstock, 2020) enabled us to achieve this?

Some benefits and limitations of employability 2.0

Comprehensive reviews of employability provision in UK universities, such as Dalrymple et al. (2021) and Norton and Dalrymple (2020), outline a fragmented terrain. These authors suggest that employability has been applied as a measure of student career readiness, future career goal setting, and portfolios of skills and personal attributes. Employability may be implemented through part-time or year-long placements as a means of growing students' social capital and enhancing career prospects (UCAS, 2020). In the 24 institutions of the Russell Group, employability encompasses 'hands off' provisions offered by career services, specific modules focused on career-development skills, and 'awards' achieved through partnerships with external organisations (Farenga and Quinlan, 2016). Some higher education institutions, for example the University of Derby, Buxton, include 'virtual' placements, whereby online learning platforms are used to simulate environments and skill-building scenarios with the help of tutors and virtual external advisors but without the need to join an actual organisation (DfE, 2021). Others, including our own institution, also focus on developing entrepreneurial skills in partnership with business incubators.

Such provisions show some headway being made towards the achievement of a 'connected curriculum', defined as six, interconnected dimensions of learning (Fung, 2017). Those include (1) collaborations between students and academics; (2) research-inspired learning being at the centre of module and programme design; (3) connecting assessment with real-world topics; (4) clear links between learning within the lecture theatre and learning during placements; (5) authentic assessments which have significance for a diverse audience and, finally, (6) creating an experience which connects students and their wider, student communities. This connectedness, enabled by the digital context of modern working environments, signals what the Australian Government's Department of Education, Skills and Employment (Bridgstock, 2020), views as 'Graduate Employability 2.0' linking 'learning, work and career' through digital tools (e.g. crowdsourcing and platform sites) and social media (e.g. LinkedIn).

In this way, employability 2.0 is enabled through student participation in communities of practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which provide the foundation for organisational learning, the latter being a topic captivating scholarly attention since the 1950s (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). Despite the variety of conceptual domains and debates surrounding it, there is broad agreement that organisational learning is the study of how individual meaning-making enables the emergence of group knowledge, how this group knowledge is converted into behaviour norms, how existing members practise them, and how new members are socialised into them. However, CoPs enable not only knowledge, but offer opportunities for participation, support, and feedback through which new entrants can 'learn the ropes' (Elkjaer, 2004; Hatmaker et al., 2011).

As a vibrant illustration, the employability provisions of our undergraduate programme reflect several of the connectivity principles behind employability 2.0 as outlined above. Delivered at the university's Penryn campus, which benefits from a small cohort of students (between 150-200 per year), researching academics offer students placement opportunities on their research projects (connectivity principle 1). We currently have students on two of our European Social Funded projects: one helping businesses in South West England build higher-level skills in their workforce, and the other working with small and medium-sized enterprises to support the region's transition to a zero-waste, circular economy. Both projects allow undergraduates (currently second and final year) to organise, co-design and deliver workshops, connecting the programme with placement learning by working on real-life problems (principle 4). This engagement with external organisations enables us to create practical case studies, for use in our own modules (principle 2). For example, we have a waste-based case study contributing to our second-year module on the circular economy, which challenges students to consider disposal solutions for compressed, personal-protective equipment (PPE) waste, produced in tonnes by a local hospital.

This case study also aligns with principle 3, as it is a current project undertaken by a small, product design business in the South West. Guided by us and the business owner, students have been exploring ways to repurpose this PPE waste material, so it can float buoy chains in a busy local harbour. This has ecological importance, as it encourages sea-grass regrowth, shown to be a better absorber of carbon dioxide than tropical rainforests

(see, for example, UN Environment programme, 2019). The work is also practically and commercially assessed in terms of whether the company can implement the solution, which fits, but also goes beyond, principles 5 and 6.

Indeed, creating, and embedding students within, a wider CoP is a key priority for us, so we ensure our employability provisions go beyond one specific programme. We wish to socialise (see Brown and Duguid, 1991) students, not just in one undergraduate degree – ours – but the wider campus community, thus achieving an overarching sense of 'togetherness' (Mäkinen, 2021). One such initiative is the use of hackathons in a multi-disciplinary event, co-delivered with the Law School. Hackathons are usually day-long problem-solving events, typically associated with the technology industry but implemented across a variety of sectors, including education (Keenan and Manolchev, 2021). We co-designed our first hackathon event, IMPACT 2020, during lockdown, and used it as a means of connecting business and law students online. We have delivered two hackathons to date (in 2020 and 2021), with partners from the local food and hospitality industry and with input from business owners and lecturers.

Providing students with access to entrepreneurs in residence and entrepreneurship funding opportunities through our partnership with a business incubator (SETSquared), as discussed above, is a logical continuation of our CoP focus. Our campus has a unique feature in that it is shared with another university, which enables students on our programme to partner with learners, not only from other disciplines, but from another institution, and pursue their entrepreneurial projects. A particularly successful initiative has been an authentic Asian food import business, which existed for three years (until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic).

Such provisions are examples of connectedness, and they allow us to implement employability 2.0 as understood in the current literature. However, they are not sufficient conditions for us to be able to demonstrate that we have achieved the praxis (as opposed to the doing, or *practice*) of employability. Praxis needs to combine both intentional action and reflection in a transformational learning experience. Consequently, employability 3.0 needs to be embedded, not only in a geographic context (as we have done with our South West partnerships), but also in a historic one, enabling students to gain awareness of struggles within their own social group, struggles which may contain all the challenges and

intersectional complexity of gender, class, race and other conditions (Glass, 2001, p. 16) and which have exerted a formative impact on students' lives, whether overtly or covertly. There is a greater urgency to this than universities may realise. The Department for Education's 2021 report, 'Employability programmes and work placements in UK higher education', acknowledges the absence of diversity data, per student group. This absence is likely to mask the uneven impact of financial pressures on students with different intersectional characteristics, as well as how well specific individual needs are met during each placement in terms of workload, supervision and so on (DfE, 2021). Students from marginalised groups may require further support in the context of employability 3.0 initiatives, in order to achieve Freire's ideal of praxis as active and reflective but also transformational learning. Accordingly, employability 3.0 needs to address, not only the practicalities of learning as a process of information management, but must also help students overcome feelings of shame or stigma on account of previous experiences (see Fung, 2017). These considerations must become the goal of employability of the future, and we conclude the final section of our opinion piece with brief horizon scanning towards employability 3.0.

Sketching 'employability 3.0'

One of the debates in the literature on organisational learning is around the degree and pace of change, whether it should radically transform organisational practices, or rather, keep updating existing policies and processes (Hong et al., 2006). This debate connects with research proposing that communities of practice (CoP) enable actors to transform their contexts by actively participating in them (Cook and Yanow, 1993).

The gap which we have identified, both from a Freirean pedagogical lens and through our review of employability best practice reports, is that intersectional characteristics offer uneven capacity for such transformation. This suggests the need for employability 3.0 to extend its support for both the learner and the individual behind the learner. Such an undertaking requires a careful balance between activities and experiences designed to help students go outside of their comfort zones but without causing harm.

Capturing data on employability outcomes for disadvantaged student groups, and using this data in annual employability programme reviews, would be a valuable starting point. This would enable extended and targeted interventions and support in a distributed way – by utilising the full CoP of academics, external partners and career services, and connectedness to the full range of online resources. Such an individualised approach is not without challenges. The Department for Education reports broad agreement on the need for employability provisions to develop (rather than signal the development of) human capital but stops short of suggesting how that might happen, simply acknowledging that 'there are different mechanisms going on at different parts of the labour market' (DfE, 2021, p. 91).

We believe that employability 3.0 should be tasked with understanding these different mechanisms and taking them into account; it should help students chart their own course – at work, in society and within their own lives.

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