

Considering the effects and desirability of the employability agenda in Higher Education and the role of a creative pedagogy as an enabling factor

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Abstract

Education is a major site of contestation with the presentation of particular ideological responses as common sense solutions. Education is not a neutral site; it shapes our future citizens, and is, therefore, a site of political interest and involvement. The role of shaping young minds is imbued with a responsibility to shape those minds in a way that is considered most productive within the dominant ideology of the time. Times of paradigm shift enable and demand the deconstruction and reconstruction of educational practices, they also create anxieties that cause ideas based on past practices to be posited as certainties that can be grasped onto as 'common sense'.

This paper argues that:

1. Whilst not unproblematic, Higher Education should prepare students for emerging working practices.
2. Traditional academic approaches have their own importance but can also be a barrier to achieving point 1.
3. Producing highly educated citizens should not be simply a matter of producing citizens imbued with the values of the current dominant ideology
4. Far from being a non-vocational, non-academic subject, creativity and creative activity can be central to a pedagogy that addresses both emergent working practices and academic development.

Introduction

Advances in technology and the consequences of rapid change in the means of social communication and organisation have impacted on how fast new and old ideologies can grip a population (Meikle & Young, 2011). The global connection of industries and economies exacerbate the speed and spread of economic and political situations. Digital technology and its associated products are having a profound effect on organisational practices, unseating manufacturing practices with their traditional conceptions of company loyalty and successful career progression (Robinson, 2011; Leadbeater, 2009; Gibbs, 2000, Guile 2009).

Large-scale companies formed around the development, production and distribution of products providing long-term employment, career structure in clearly defined hierarchies and skills based teams are on the decline in the United Kingdom and have been for decades. Small companies responsive to the emerging needs of a knowledge economy form clusters around the generation and deployment of ideas. Sole trader and Small/Medium Enterprises (SMEs) form the basis of the contemporary UK economy (Guile, 2009, Robinson, 2011, Leadbeater 2009).

There are industry monoliths with a very important role to play however they themselves break into divisions and subsidiaries bringing together and dispersing teams at speed. The existence of clusters of SMEs supports and maintains their activities providing preformed transient labour: a company that can be contracted rather than an employee with development needs and employment rights.

Change, however, is never a case of replacing one scenario with another. Even with the most fervent of socio-economic or political revolutions, deeply entrenched views persist as to 'the nature of things' colouring the method by which an alternate ideology is implemented. Linearity is also unlikely: at times of significant change current and emerging practices operate alongside each other, sometimes competing, sometimes collaborating. Change creates anxiety and the search for certainties: contestation of previously taken for granted terms, practices and values and the presentation of particular solutions as common sense.

Education has become a major site of contestation and the presentation of particular ideological responses as common sense solutions. Education is not a neutral site; it shapes our future citizens, and is, therefore, a site of political interest and involvement. The role of shaping young minds is imbued with a responsibility to shape those minds in a way that is considered most productive within the dominant ideology of the time. Times of paradigm shift enable and demand the deconstruction and reconstruction of educational practices, they also create anxieties that cause ideas based on past practices to be posited as certainties that can be grasped onto as 'common sense'.

Education is posited as a means to employment: graduates should leave university as work-ready experts in their field imbued with the practices and values of their chosen industry (Ashe, 2012). Education is posited as a means to further a country's global competitiveness through ground breaking research

and academic excellence. The binary logic of the academic/vocational purposes of Higher Education is a considerable site of contestation (Kruss, 2004; Gibbs, 2000; Robinson, 2011; Ashe, 2012). These purposes are both joint and oppositional. The contestation plays out in the perception of Higher Education by policy makers, industry leaders, university governance and the media (Kruss, 2004; Gibbs, 2000; Robinson, 2011; Ashe, 2012). Educators, students and increasingly parents are all struggling to grasp the purpose and meaning of their activities.

What makes a person employable?

Arguably, where there are major changes in how the working world organises itself, what is taught now will be transient and potentially unhelpful within the long-term nature of Higher Education. This problem is at the heart of current thinking regarding employability and its characteristics.

Yorke (2004) provides a concise definition of employability as:

“A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”

Adding Hillage and Pollard’s definition (1998 in Yorke, 2004) as

“The capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment”

There are many lists of generic employability skills, the list below was generated by the Pedagogy for Employability Group (2004) and will serve as a framework for this discussion:

“imagination/creativity; adaptability / flexibility; willingness to learn; independent working / autonomy; working in a team; ability to manage others; ability to work under pressure; good oral communication; communication in writing for varied purposes; attention to detail; time management; assumption of responsibility and for making decisions; and planning; coordinating and organising ability”

The CBI/UUK Report (2009) also highlights self-management, teamworking, business and customer awareness, problem solving, communication and literacy, numeracy, IT skills, a positive attitude and entrepreneurship/enterprise.

Patterns and conceptions of employment are changing. The condition of the labour market used to be a signifier of the condition of an economy and, by extension, a government's success. Employment was previously considered the right of citizens of developed countries (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2004; Clegg, 2010). The rise of neo-liberalism has replaced the role of the government in maintaining the health of the labour market with the role of the individual. Neo-liberalism combines the 'freedom' of the individual to be self-managing with the logic of the open market: the individual acts, the market decides. This ideology reduces the responsibility of government for the situation of its citizens. Within this paradigm the individual becomes responsible for his/her success in the labour market, in this instance by gaining and maintaining the characteristics of

employability. The key factor of enablement has been identified as education, with Higher Education posited as a form of 'finishing school' for professionals.

The impact of the neo-liberal paradigm cannot be underplayed and will be revisited in relation to the question of the highly educated citizen.

At this stage of discussion neo-liberalism forms an impetus for promoting employability in graduates. The characteristics of employability acknowledge the consequences of the shifts of recent decades from a manufacturing based economy where careers were tied to companies and well defined industries to a knowledge based economy often rooted in the rapid formation and dissolution of multidisciplinary teams. Careers are being replaced with jobs (Sennet 2001 in Amaral & Magalhaes, 2004; Ashe, 2012), security with anxiety, and solid, dependable skills with flexible, transferable competencies (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2004).

The importance of sole traders and SME's (CBI/UUK, 2009; Moreland, 2004) mean that graduates are not only tasked with responsibility for their own success in the labour market but also with creating their own space in it. This raises a requirement for entrepreneurial thinking, a characteristic that may previously have been regarded with suspicion by long-term employers (Sewell & Pool, 2010).

Sewell and Pool (2010) equate entrepreneurial sensibilities with enterprise skills and present Rae's (2007) definition as "the skills, knowledge and attributes needed to apply creative ideas and innovations to practical solutions" including

“initiative, independence, creativity, problem solving, identifying and working on opportunities, leadership, acting resourcefully and responding to challenges” Sewell & Pool (2010) add to this “the ability to generate creative ideas, take risks in implementing them and be motivated to get them off the ground.” Until recently such skills and characteristics; employability and enterprise, were developed tacitly rather than explicitly in a Higher Education context (Kruss, 2004).

Thus a broad range of skills, understandings and attributes are considered necessary for the new graduate entering the job market. Hinchcliff (2006) wonders how anyone, even the most seasoned professional, can meet the ever-growing list of attributes and expectations. It appears to be an aim that puts too much stress on the student who has to add this burden to the acquisition of academic and subject specific skills. For many students this is a time in life where anxiety for the future is already apparent. It is questionably unrealistic and potentially harmful to make them so responsible for their own success at this stage in their development. Along with greater anxiety for the student comes a greater pressure on universities and university education to provide all the skills and support necessary to propel graduates to success.

There are serious reservations concerning the explicit teaching of employability. Gibbs (2000), whilst not against the idea as a small cog in a big wheel, expresses concern that this doesn't become the primary purpose of Higher Education based on gaining a return for a financial investment.

He provides 3 reservations:

- “the building of an aim of higher education on what is an indistinct and poorly formulated concept”,
- “it assumes the acceptance of” a “single ideology”; neo-liberalism
- it is “defined as a monologue of the skilled employee selling his/her skills to satisfy the employer need” which may not be in the best interests of either the employee or the employer as its logic rests on traditional long-term employment.

Ashe (2012) raises concerns over the reduction of the “intellectual breadth of student’s experiences” and the “emphasis on personal skills profiling” where skills are abstracted from subject content and of little interest to students more focussed on learning centred on the subject they chose to study.

Should employability be an outcome of HE?

Guile (2009) asserts that the UK government and European Union assume qualifications are a measure of the development of ‘vocational’ practice, that employers can, and should, be able to match qualifications straightforwardly to job roles. He cites the Unit for Development of Adult Continuing Education (1992) proposing that degree programmes should stipulate their outcomes in relation to subject knowledge, key skills and employability skills such that a potential employer can judge the match between graduate attainment and their needs.

The expectations exist whether they are welcome or not. These expectations are tied to current and future funding policies both directly from government and indirectly in the fees students pay. There are increasing demands from prospective students and their parents to ensure their financial investment is rewarded with a tangible outcome, namely employment, as Higher Education is presented to them as a trade of fees for employability.

We need to avoid the neo-liberal extremes of a purely market based education, such as “The United States’ recent proposal to the World Trade Organisation to consider education as a tradable service or commodity” (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2004). Such commodification leads to: a) the notion an education can be obtained in exchange for fees rather than achievement, and b) the need to quantify outcomes and, therefore, reduce education to measurable standardised components (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2004). As Clegg (2010) points out “Higher Education is a site of multiple practices, experiences and embodiments. Higher Education Policy however narrows our horizons”. Kruss (2004) highlights the danger of Higher Education becoming focused on developing workplace skills rather than the “production and dissemination of knowledge” that indirectly prepares students for a professional working life.

There are certainly problems associated with a pedagogy of employability dominating HE. There needs to be a resistance to the expectation of industry that HE will do all the work for them, conducted in the form of meaningful dialogue towards mutually beneficial and realistic expectations for employer, university curriculum and student.

The widening participation agenda of the previous government and subsequent massification of HE has had an effect on the entry skills and cultural capital undergraduates arrive with. Class, ethnicity and gender all have a role to play in the student's ability to present themselves as employable (Kruss, 2004; Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth & Rose, 2013). There are problems associated with potentially indoctrinating students with a neo-liberal mindset; this is to be avoided. However there is something to be said for helping to build the cultural capital of less advantaged groups, of helping undergraduates to lessen the obstacles to achieving their goals.

Higher Education, pre-widening participation, addressed employability indirectly because the skills, understandings and personal attributes of traditional undergraduates have been developed tacitly throughout their lives as an element of identity and cultural understanding. The explicit development of employability is something more likely taken up by new universities as opposed to long standing universities whose reputation is enough to maintain their success. Attendance at such a university, by implication, suggests the possession of ideal cultural capital to a prospective employer.

On one hand this difference between the provision of traditional and post polytechnic universities enables an attempt at leveling the playing field. On the other hand it represents a tension concerning the purpose of such institutions highlighting the apparent contradiction in the current mantra that the purpose of HE is to raise employability and that the best place to achieve this is at a traditional (read Russell Group) university.

The role of traditional academic practices and the highly educated citizen

The Russell Group, a group of 24 traditional research intensive HEIs, is increasingly being presented as the HE destination for success. The implication of measuring and publishing statistics relating to the backgrounds of the Russell Group student population, combined with the presentation of the Russell Group's 'facilitating' subjects as the subjects for a successful university application, provides a sense that this is the destination all potential undergraduates should aspire to. These universities form the basis of the definition of terms such as 'elite' and 'top' casually used by the media and government. One of Gove's intentions in his education reforms is to "ensure more disadvantaged children from the poorest parts of London made it to elite universities" (Gove, 2013). This, for Gove, is a measure of social mobility and enablement.

The UK media provided much coverage of the Russell Group's guidance on 'facilitating' subjects for successful admission to 'top' universities. For 'A' level study they suggest; Maths, Further Maths, English, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Geography, History and Languages (classical & modern). They usefully add the proviso that if you wish to study art or music at university you will need to study art or music at 'A' level. Subjects they suggest as being detrimental to successful university application include Media Studies, Art and Design, Photography and Business Studies, described as 'soft' due to their vocational/practical nature. For the prospective 'A' level student to whom the facilitating subjects appear unattractive they pose the question "are you trying to avoid a challenge?" (Russell Group, 2013).

There is an assumption here that everyone is aiming to gain a place at an 'elite' university and if not they should be, which is great marketing for Russell Group universities but not necessarily great advice to 16 year olds and their parents. The most recently released statistics for employment and student satisfaction allude to this. In the Telegraph's top 10 universities for getting a job only three Russell Group universities are represented, none of which is in the top three (Telegraph, 2013). In the Complete University Guide's published university league tables only Oxford and Cambridge are represented in the top ten for student satisfaction, which is often used as a measure of teaching quality (Complete University Guide, 2013). Whilst statistics and their interpretation are fraught with difficulty this raises some questions concerning the Russell Group = best equation.

Something that is noticeable about these subjects is the absence of 'creative subjects' indeed the negative cost of pursuing creative subjects unless you have a specific wish to be a musician or artist. Gove tells us "the ability to think computationally, and the creativity inherent in designing new programmes will help prepare all our young people better for the future. It will be impossible to call yourself educated in years to come unless you understand, and can influence, the changes technology brings" (Gove, 2013). However, what is unclear is how this is to be achieved through a narrow and prescriptive curriculum with a startling absence of investment in creativity.

Study of maths and science has long been held as a signifier of rigorous and objective learning in the search for knowledge as a series of facts and truth, with

the arts and creativity being perceived as involved with frivolous individual concerns such as feelings and self-expression (Robinson, 2011). These perceptions have origins in the ideologies of the Enlightenment and the Romantics, which divided artists and scientists into two distinct and almost opposing types of people. These notions have remained highly influential in UK culture and perceptions of academic quality and rigour (Runco and Albert, 2010; Robinson 2011).

There is, therefore, a tension between traditional views of education as science based, concerning the learning of facts, and of the requirements presented above for a 21st Century graduate. The neo-liberal agenda has become so pervasive it has become 'common sense'. This both contradicts the traditional model of an 'elite' education with its stress on non-vocational learning and compliments it in providing a desirable product and a producer of 'quality' graduates into the labour market.

To be a truly highly educated citizen is surely at odds with becoming an unquestioning product of a single ideology, a resource for the use of others, a model neo-liberal citizen. Graduates need to be equipped to function successfully in the society they inhabit. In a society that tells them they are responsible for their own success they need to be equipped to take that responsibility. However they need to understand the context of their actions to be true agents in their own world, to enable change and to adapt to change. Any ideology is transient.

The aims of Higher Education, whilst a site of contestation and change since its inception and journey through socio-economic and political change, must surely be concerned with complex learning and a complex relationship with knowledge, including such skills as: hypothesising, synthesising, reflecting, generating ideas, solving ill-defined problems and the application of existing knowledge to new domains. These are characteristics of abstract thinking that are associated with creativity (Biggs in Jackson 2002:4 in Jackson, 2006). It is important to maintain the development and dissemination of knowledge in traditional subjects. These skills can be developed and applied in the study of Law, Medicine and History, for example, and subjects such as these are vital to our preservation.

However this is only part of the story, not everyone can be lawyers, doctors, researchers or politicians. The cultural heritage of the UK celebrates its diverse island population and contemporary cultural activity is an area of continued growth despite the recession (Department of Culture, Media & Sport, 2011).

Diversity of provision, and graduates who, as a population, can cope with a diversity of ideas and practices, surely cannot be achieved through a narrow curriculum, from a narrow range of institutions with a narrow set of values.

There is an important role for creative and cultural knowledge in this knowledge economy and, as shall be illustrated, in employability.

Towards a creative pedagogy

What is creativity? A working definition of creativity is the production of something original and of value where something can be an idea, a process or a

product. Value relates to its usefulness, either in embodying the solution to a problem or in being considered important in its domain, or both. This definition is an adaptation of definitions provided by Robinson, (2011), Boden (2004) and Sternberg, Kaufman and Pretz (2012) and forms a framework for the following discussion. In this instance creativity is an act. What is of interest here are the enablers of that act, the characteristics that require development in students for them to be able to perform that act. **Process?**

Below is a table containing characteristics of creativity placed alongside the previously discussed characteristics of employability. The characteristics of creativity have been identified and amalgamated from the work of Kozbelt, Beghetto and Runco (2010), Sternberg & Lubart (1998), Sternberg, Kaufman and Pretz (2012) and Fryer (2006).

Characteristics of Creativity	Characteristics of Employability including Entrepreneurship
<p>Creativity as imagination realised</p> <p>Originality / innovative thinking</p> <p>Openness to complex & ambiguous settings</p> <p>Team work / collaboration</p> <p>Personal & interpersonal skills</p> <p>Transfer and application of learning in new contexts</p> <p>Openness to explore new things (new to the person) /</p> <p>Development of new knowledge / practices</p> <p>Imaginative and skilled use of media</p> <p>Engages in a systematic process of enquiry</p> <p>Independence of judgement</p> <p>Self discipline</p> <p>Analysis and synthesis</p> <p>Capacity to consider and solve complex problems</p> <p>Initiative</p> <p>Review & evaluation of ideas</p> <p>Lateral thinking</p> <p>Risk taking & ability to cope with 'failure'</p> <p>Motivation</p> <p>Reflection</p> <p>Problem finding</p> <p>Divergent and convergent thinking</p> <p>Entrepreneurship</p>	<p>Creativity / imagination</p> <p>Adaptability / flexibility</p> <p>Willingness to learn</p> <p>Independent working / autonomy</p> <p>Team working</p> <p>Ability to manage others</p> <p>Ability to work under pressure</p> <p>Ability to identify & act on opportunities</p> <p>Good oral communication</p> <p>Written communication for varied purposes</p> <p>Attention to detail</p> <p>IT skills</p> <p>Time management</p> <p>Assumption of responsibility</p> <p>Ability to make decisions to plan / coordinate / organise</p> <p>Business / customer awareness</p> <p>Problem solving</p> <p>Initiative</p> <p>Resourcefulness</p> <p>Responds to challenges</p> <p>Take risks</p> <p>Motivation to implement ideas</p>

It is clear from this table that there is a great deal of mirroring between creativity and employability. In addition there are many characteristics associated with complex learning recognisable as Higher Education outcomes. Enhancing the creativity of our students meets the needs of employability whilst simultaneously enabling students to explore new horizons. Educators can help students prepare to function at a professional level in contemporary society whilst developing higher level cognition skills that enable them to question current beliefs and systems and envisage new possibilities.

At the heart of creativity lie imagination, innovation, originality and risk taking. This creates a tension with desires for certainty. Anxieties concerning rapid change will lead to the contradiction of creative activity being perceived as a threat as well as a necessity. On the one hand Gove (2013) recognises the need for creativity, on the other he talks of putting “the teacher back in control” with the implication of the need for a disciplined learning at the cost of enabling young people to explore and discover, to encounter and consider a diversity of ideas and cultural artefacts.

A creative pedagogy requires providing possibilities for the exploration of ideas and cultural heritage. It requires the promotion of diversity as an initiator of discovery and of ideation. It promotes working with others to share knowledge and develop ideas from a diverse base. It requires the enablement of an environment where students are not measured at every opportunity but are allowed to ‘fail’ in order to learn to take risks without debilitating cost. As Alexander and Shoshani (2010) state “Creativity needs flexible experimentation

space that allows students to free themselves from the limitations of existing knowledge”.

It requires scenarios to be developed for students to be able to identify and resolve their own ill-defined problems (Kozbelt, Beghetto & Runco, 2010). It requires the development of expertise in a domain to enable the development of creative products and the ability to communicate their purpose (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). All too often the lack of preparatory skills in specific domains is mistaken for a lack of ability to be creative. Young people need to be taught such skills and understandings throughout their education to develop self-confidence and subsequent self-motivation (Robinson, 2011). Sternberg, Kaufman and Pretz (2012) identify the connection between the performance of creatively motivated people and a society that values and supports cultural diversity, creative expression and enterprise.

Conclusion

Whilst deeply problematic, if viewed purely in terms of producing model neo-liberal citizens, taking personal responsibility for the vagaries of the labour market and ever shrinking job security, opportunities are provided to enrich the learning of undergraduates. The provision of employability must not be reduced to a box ticking exercise where students conduct tick box self assessments of specific pre-identified criteria and universities tick their provision box by replacing opportunities for learning with this unwelcome exercise. The requirement for delivering employability can generate positive opportunities to

enable students to develop their self-confidence, self-motivation, capacity for innovation and collaboration.

Creativity, whether taught in relation to expertise in a specific domain for aspiring creative industry professionals or, as an aspect of general education, is a valuable asset in the armoury of the highly educated graduate. Fear of change, difference or risk caused by uncertainty should not act as an obstacle to the study of creativity or its perceived value.

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