

Teaching the sociology of employability: the opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

This discussion piece addresses the opportunities and challenges that producing and delivering an employability-related course poses, when that course is taught on a programme situated within a critical discipline (Sociology). It addresses the conflict between neoliberal discourses on employability and critical responses to this within sociological approaches to the issue. It does this by using a Bourdieusian (1979, 1986, 1990) framework. This article addresses issues that are more theoretical than practice-orientated, but I conclude the paper by reflecting upon how both the two seemingly intractable positions of neoliberal discourses on employability and critical responses can be drawn upon by students and the institution.

The start of my journey - *Working in Sociology*

My journey into employability was an outcome of two main requirements. I was asked to be the employability officer for my department (HPSS in FACH) and I was given the responsibility of developing and delivering a core course for second-year Sociology undergraduates which addressed employability.

The course that I developed and then delivered for the first time in January 2013 is called *Working in Sociology*. It is a 15-credit (one-term) core course on the Sociology BA (Hons) and first named 'Sociology combination programmes'. The course embeds the development and assessment of key transferable employability-related skills and proficiencies, including CV writing, job application statement writing, preparation for interview and interview skills. The course also includes talks by visiting speakers currently working in careers that the students may aspire to or that we should like them to aspire to, followed by Q & A sessions. Since many of these speakers are former students, current undergraduates strongly identify with them. Aspirations can be raised with a 'if she/he can do it, so can I' approach. During the course, students are given the opportunity to discuss the careers that they want to enter and are made aware of the opportunities that a Sociology degree might offer them. Often, our students already have some of the skills, experience and understanding that graduate-level employers are looking for and, once this has been pointed out to them, their confidence starts to grow. Students are encouraged to find job advertisements in their chosen careers, to identify the essential and desirable skills, experience and understanding that they will need to obtain such jobs. Having acquired a sense of what they already have, what they need and how to market themselves via a strong CV, LinkedIn account and so on, they are in a position to form a plan for the rest of their time at Greenwich. In the latter part of the course, students produce a literature-based piece of research structured as a report, which addresses the question '*What factors increase the employability of sociology graduates?*' As well as developing and practising research skills and report-writing skills, this assignment again focuses students on what they need to do to improve their employability over the remainder of their time with us. One of many positive outcomes from this course has been that this year, for the first time, more final-year Sociology students than in the past chose to

do a placement rather than a dissertation. The experience of a graduate-level work placement - and being able to include it in their CVs - will be of great benefit to these students in the future. In Bourdieu's terms, the course provides students with a "feel for the game" (1990) - understanding, orientation and direction, in relation to the graduate employment market.

So far, this is all straightforward and positive. However, the sociological literature on employability, which provides the academic material within which the development of skills and understanding is embedded, tends to critically address the 'employability agenda', situating it as part of a broader growth of neoliberalism within Britain and, more broadly, a growth of neoliberalism globally. Over the span of the course, many of the issues and practices that we address can be positioned within one of two broad discourses. These may be referred to as 'individualising' discourses (that tend to see/construct employability as a 'problem' of the individual and tend to benefit neoliberalism) and more 'social/critical' discourses (that tend to emphasise that the 'problem' of employability is, in essence, related to social factors such as social inequality and tends to be critical of neoliberalism).

'Individualising' discourses in employability and the growth of neoliberalism

Changes in the relationship between government, higher education and the employment market, the expansion of higher education and the impact of neoliberalism show clearly how employability has come to be understood predominantly in terms of the individual, abstracted from social context. From the early twentieth century until roughly the 1980s, the Haldane Principle and its prevailing arrangements meant that higher education policy (including policy to do with graduate employment) was primarily decided upon by academics themselves, not by the government (Boden and Nedeva, 2010). Since the advent of Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979, neoliberal policies have greatly altered how government, higher education and the employment market have interacted. The state, by way of funding streams, performance management regimes and other strategies, has increased its hold over the higher education sector (Boden and Nedeva, 2010). The relative self-governance of higher education policy no longer exists.

Inevitably, since higher education has become increasingly subject to market forces and increased competition for resources, individualised ways of understanding the issue of employability have become the dominant discourse. The monitoring of performance and a 'league-table culture' increase the generation of statistical data which purport to measure the performance of universities – and the unit of analysis is usually the individual student. So, not only is this unit of analysis at the centre of this collective set of discourses and practices, but, in turn, these discourses and practices reproduce the idea that it is at the level of the individual student that the 'problem' is located and is to be 'resolved'. The socially-abstracted 'individual' and, in turn, the myth of a meritocratic society and dominant notions of employability produce, reproduce and reinforce one another. They are produced as 'objects' of which we may speak (think and write) by these technologies of market forces or, as Foucault (1974) referred to them, discourse and networks of discursive practice. It is the contention of this piece that this 'individualising' discourse, which is part and parcel of the neoliberal colonisation of higher education, is now the dominant one in the 'Conversation' (Gee, 1999) about employability. (Gee uses the term 'Conversation' to refer to everything that is written and said, wherever and by whomever, on a given topic.) This does not mean, however, that this dominance is uncontested.

Critical approaches to neoliberal discourses on employability

The other discourse frequently encountered, more so in the academic literature than elsewhere, is that which may be labelled as the 'social/critical' discourse. A significant body of academic work within sociology and related disciplines has been concerned with issues such as how students from different social groups, with different types and amounts of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) at their disposal, with different advantages/disadvantages and often attending different types of universities, fare in higher education. It considers this in relation to issues like attainment, engaging with employability-related teaching, services, advice, what opportunities they might be able to capitalise on, or not, and - importantly - why? This critical reflection is often absent from other discussions of employability and, in the absence of critical reflection, the dominant 'individualising' discourse underpins much thinking, writing and practice. In essence, it has become the default position. Simple recourse to some of the main ideas of Bourdieu (1979) helps us to understand how this has happened. If we think about higher education and employability as being positioned within a field of relations of power - a specific part of overall society - we can recognise that particular relations of power exist within the field of higher education in the UK. Universities themselves (though this is not uniformly so) are no longer as dominant within this field of relations as they once were. Government has usurped this position and now exercises dominance through the 'mechanisms' or market technologies outlined above. By way of these, the neoliberal discourse of employability as a 'problem' of the abstracted individual has become the dominant one or, as Bourdieu refers to it, the 'orthodox discourse'. However, it is always subject to challenge by alternative perspectives (Bourdieu, 1992).

The prominence of this 'individualising' and its accompanying assertions within such neoliberal discourses is of great concern within much that has been published on the topic of employability within the academic realm – and with good reason. One issue of relevance to this discussion is that companies have been moving away from their social obligations to society and employees in order to maximise profitability. In doing so, the employability and, thereby, 'success' of an individual, has been shifted on to the individual her- or himself, with government mirroring this corporate agenda (Brown *et al*, 2003) and better-trained, better-equipped-to-learn graduates frequently having to take up what were previously non-graduate-level jobs. In essence, such employers get a better-educated employee, with lower training costs accruing to themselves, whilst university fees have accrued to the individual (Boden and Nedeva, 2010). For a broader critical discussion of the changing relationship between young people, education and employment, see Ainley and Allen (2010).

What is the way forward?

On the face of it, an entrenched neoliberal political system and its dominance over higher education and a fierce body of critical theory leave us stuck between the proverbial 'rock and a hard place'. Practitioners of higher education nevertheless have a commitment to their students and, at this difficult time, our employability as academics is bound up within this struggle too. Most academic staff have little, if any, influence over the terrain upon which this 'game' must be 'played'. The neoliberal agenda would prefer less critical voices of dissent and the social sciences and humanities are not always favoured in prevailing funding arrangements. However, two obvious questions arise from this discussion. Firstly, what has been the outcome of these two seemingly intractable positions within my course *Working in Sociology*? Secondly, what are the broader implications for our university?

Many of my students, by the end of the course, have gravitated towards a critical stance, but this is tempered by the realities of life. They may be critical in their understanding of society, power, the labour market and so on, but they know they still have to 'play the game'. For some, the myth of meritocracy has been almost a comforting one. False ideologies often are (this being part of how they win acceptance). Others do not believe in it anyway, especially many of those from socially-excluded groups, whose day-to-day experience has long since given them an inherent understanding of inequality. Nearly all of them will have to work and the more thoroughly they can understand this field of power relations, the more success they will have. However, success may be measured in many ways. Sociology students often gravitate towards careers that, in a range of ways, are concerned with addressing the needs of society. In such times of growing social inequality and exclusion, they are needed now more than ever. Having participated in this course, they will be better equipped, in many ways, to do this.

At an institutional level, we can do much of what we are already doing. At university, faculty, department and programme levels, so much good work is already being done. Whilst many of our students may lack the connections of more privileged students and the benefits accruing from social privilege in terms of what they know (cultural capital) and whom they know (social capital) (Bourdieu, 1986), the university, as a network of individuals, has a wealth of such capital. Pooling and using this collective capital is surely the way to think about how best to do what needs to be done. Shortly before I submitted this article, the paper *Thematic Element Student Employability* was circulated. This paper neatly summarises our Employment Outcomes Strategy and the stage we have currently reached with it. As it says, the University of Greenwich has the highest proportion of working-class students in the sector and is among the highest for BME students. The disadvantages when such students attempt to enter the graduate employment market are clear, with the 2012 DLHE survey showing 83.1% of Greenwich graduates from six months earlier being in employment or further study, as opposed to a sector median of 90%. Yet the university's five-themed strategy (academic attainment, employability skills, job finding skills, work experience and transition to work) is clearly working – with 85.9% of Greenwich graduates surveyed in the 2014 DLHE survey being in employment or further study (up from 83.1% just two years earlier).

Our university has great aspiration and we wish to develop the same within our students. Brown *et al* (2003) argue that elite universities use their institutional reputations to place their graduates in enviable jobs. Our university has aspirations to climb the league tables and, as it does so, can utilise growing social capital and reputation for our good and for that of our students. We must continue to pursue employability goals with vigour, but we must do it with the critical, questioning faculty that befits us as academics and our students as learners.

Postscript - I envisage this article as the first in a series. In later publications, I should like to consider further the staff and student experiences of employability. To this end, I should be interested in your reflections on my thoughts as detailed here and on your experiences of embedding employability into the curriculum. Please email me at c.m.morris@gre.ac.uk.

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