

ICED 2020 proceedings:

Forming future-ready graduates by focusing on the collective dimension of employability

Mariangela Lungren-Resenterra¹

University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, Geneva School of Business Administration

Genève, Switzerland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1979-765X>

Abstract

Preparing future-ready graduates who fit readily into labour markets represents a significant issue for higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide. Industrial stakeholders and HEIs claim that forming students ready for employment implies providing them with the necessary qualifications and personal skills essential for future work. This viewpoint has been challenged by recent research on employability conducted by Kahn and Lundgren-Resenterra. They argue that such interpretations label higher education merely as a personal commodity acquired and consumed for an individual economic reward, thus undermining possibilities to frame employability as developing collective interests. This paper reflects on reinforcing the collective dimension of learning strategies, thereby avoiding reduction of the value of learning to purely labour market needs. It aims to answer the following key research question: How can HEIs provide learning strategies designed to develop graduates' collective interests towards work through collective reflexivity and corporate agency, whose emancipatory use-value is transferable to workplace collectives? The paper draws on critical realism, and more specifically on Archer's work, to understand how collective reflexivity generates the emancipation of group members. Meanwhile, expansive learning is viewed as an alternative way of learning and knowledge construction as it relies on sharing concerns and interests with peers, thereby triggering change. Expansive learning cycles will be implemented in a Bachelor's-level HR Management course of a Swiss School of Business Administration to evaluate by term's end how students perceive expansion learning as a means of developing their reflexivity and corporate agency, thereby questioning existing current assumptions about employability based on the skillset discourse. Such measures should help HEIs reach beyond the skills agenda discourse dictated by labour markets and provide graduates with learning opportunities that emancipate them to be agents who develop their own narratives for their future work paths, thereby ennobling the role of HEIs.

1 Introduction

In recent years the notion of preparing students to become future-ready graduates who fit readily into the labour market has come to the fore in education policy debates across the world (Barnett, 2016; European Commission, 2016; Minocha, Hristov, & Leahy-Harland, 2018; Small, Shacklock, & Marchant, 2017). How we understand and conceptualise employability, however, has a significant impact on the teaching and learning process, and on what comes to be regarded as indispensable learning outcomes (Holmes, 2013). Tomlinson (2010, 2017) contends that the dominant view in policy debates concerning employability entails providing students with the skills and attributes required by the labour market. McQuaid and Colin (2005) argued that employability, informed as it is by labour market demands, has become shorthand

¹ mariangela.lundgren@hesge.ch

for “individual’s employability skills and attributes” discourse (p. 197), focusing thereby on market economy principles based on demand and supply (Kalfa & Taksa, 2015). Tomlinson (2017), meanwhile, contends that employability perceives education as a means to economic prosperity through the human capital theory. The European Commission Report (2016) regarding employability stated clearly that the development of graduates’ skills and attributes is a way to increase the economic growth of European Union nations by developing students’ human capital.

The human capital discourse, meanwhile, emphasises a supposed connection between higher education and individual employment opportunities as it banks on the assumption that investing in education increases graduates’ future perspectives of employment for personal economic growth (Kalfa & Taksa, 2015). Such a viewpoint results in conceptualising employability as a personal endeavour to gain the appropriate knowledge and skill set that one can bring into any kind of work setting for financial success (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Minotcha et al., 2018). Conceptualising learning in terms of global skills shapes the learning process, however, mainly in relation to market demands rather than according to students’ needs, thereby undermining students’ agency for emancipation as members of the future workforce who have a say in shaping their own future work life narrative.

2 Challenging the current employability concept

Kalfa and Taksa (2015) argue that the human capital discourse around employability has its limitations as it correlates specific skills and knowledge possession with employment outcomes, thereby establishing a direct connection between the two. Kahn and Lundgren-Resenterra (forthcoming), meanwhile, argue that such interpretations label higher education merely as a personal commodity acquired and consumed for individual economic reward, thus undermining possibilities to frame employability to develop collective interests towards work. Higher education is, therefore, considered as a personal learning process leaving little or no space for a collective dimension to knowledge acquisition transferable to work situations (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Meanwhile, Ashforth, Harrison and Corley (2008) contend that it is the collective aspect to work that provides it with sense-making through shared values, beliefs, concerns, and interests supporting cooperation and decision-making that connect individuals to their organisation. Little research, however, exists that explores the role collectives play in higher education learning, except studies focusing on specific collectives such as learning communities, communities of practice or those linked to minorities (Kahn & Lundgren-Resenterra, forthcoming).

3 Employability as a collective process

Kahn and Lundgren-Resenterra (forthcoming) contend that considering a collective perspective on employability helps students prepare to make contributions to work collectives that reach beyond individual financial benefit, thereby acknowledging the human flourishing of all members of a work community. They argue that by integrating collective aspects into the learning process, they increase students’ corporate agency through collective reflexivity essential for human emancipation. Their definition of graduate employability encompasses the capacity of graduates to act as corporate agents within a work setting, thus enhancing work collectives. The development of this capacity to contribute to work collectives is directly linked to how graduates can trigger corporate agency. Here corporate agency refers to groups of people who share the same concerns, beliefs, and values and who shape their own narratives as future workforce members when transitioning from higher education into work settings. How higher education can trigger such corporate agency through a collective approach towards learning is the purpose of this paper, which addresses the following research question: How can HEIs provide learning strategies designed for developing graduates’ mutual interests towards work, thereby enhancing collective reflexivity and corporate agency whose emancipatory use-value is transferable to workplace situations?

4 Research approach

The study draws on critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008), and more specifically on Archer's work, to understand how a collective approach towards learning triggers collective reflexivity generating the emancipation of group members. Archer (2013) defines collective reflexivity as the mental deliberations used by people individually but who engage with others in joint actions to tackle problems as corporate agents, thereby attaining change. Meanwhile, corporate agency denotes what emerges from the activities of organised interest groups which address shared concerns critically (Archer, 2003) but in a way relevant for future work (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). However, the question remains how such collective reflexivity which triggers corporate agency can be obtained in higher education settings, whose emancipatory use-value can then be transferred to work situations.

Expansive learning is helpful to understand the emergence of corporate agency, as it relies on collectives rather than individual approaches to learning and knowledge construction. It is viewed as an alternative way of learning and knowledge construction as it counts on sharing concerns and interests with peers, thereby triggering reflexivity for the formation of agency offering an emancipatory use-value to the objects of human activity (Engeström, 2015). Here expansion refers to cycles of action within a learning process that starts by questioning accepted concepts or practice through collective reflexivity, then continues by analysing their conclusions to find plausible causes or explanatory mechanisms. Such explanations are then examined, modelled and later implemented into a work process to finally be consolidated into a stable form of practice (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, Engeström, 2015). The expansive learning process thus generates knowledge that is transferable to other contexts outside higher education settings, such as work situations.

5 Research implementation

Expansive learning cycles will be implemented in a Bachelor's-level HR Management course of a Swiss School of Business Administration to evaluate by term's end how students develop their reflexivity and corporate agency with emancipatory use-value for employability. Data will be collected through a survey and individual semi-directed interviews. It will then be analysed to explore and understand how students perceive the collective learning approach as a way to advance collective reflexivity for the emancipation of collectives, thereby transforming employability into a corporate concept.

6 Conclusions

Such insights should help HEIs implement teaching and learning strategies reaching beyond the individual skill set discourse dictated by labour markets (Cashian, 2017). Expansive learning strategies would enhance students' collective reflexivity and corporate agency, liberating them from labour market imposition of what learning outcomes should be targeted by HEIs for employment purposes. The learning process would thus acquire an emancipatory use-value relevant for graduates' future work life. This approach helps to question current assumptions about employability associated with individual attributes and skills as the ultimate exchange value for employment purposes. Graduates would transform themselves into future-ready agents who have a say in developing future personal work paths designed for the flourishing of whole collectives, thereby ennobling the role of HEIs.

References

- Archer, MS (2003). *Structure, agency and the internal conversation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, MS (2013). Collective reflexivity: A relational case for it. In C. Powell and F. Dépelteau (Eds.), *Conceptualising relational sociology: Ontological and theoretical issues* (pp. 145-161). Houndmills, UK: Palgrave.
- Ashforth, B.E., Harrison, S.H., & Corley, K.G. (2008). Identification in organisations: An examination of four fundamental questions. *Journal of Management*, 34(3), 325-374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206308316059>
- Barnett, R. (2016). Policy, what policy? In P. John & J. Fanghanel (Eds.). *Dimensions of marketisation in higher education* (pp. 223-232). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Bhaskar, R. (2008). *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (2nd ed). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Boden, R., & Nedeava, M. (2010). Employing discourse: universities and graduate "employability". *Journal of Education Policy*, 25(1), 37-54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930903349489>
- Cashian, P. (2017). Developing a more coherent and robust basis for employability research: A critical realist perspective. In, M. Tomlinson and L. Holmes (Eds.). *Graduate employability in context* (pp 109-128). New York, USA: Springer.
- Engeström, Y. (2015). Learning by expanding. An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Engeström, Y., & Sannino, A. (2010), Studies of expansive learning: Foundations, findings and future challenges. *Educational Research Review*, 5(1), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2009.12.002>
- European Commission (2016). *A new skills agenda for Europe*. Brussels, European Commission.
- Holmes, L. (2013). Competing perspectives on graduate employability: Possession, position or process? *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(4), 538-554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.587140>
- Kahn, P.E., & Lundgren-Resenterra, M. (forthcoming). Employability as a capacity for agency in the workplace: the implications for higher education of a collective perspective on work. *Higher Education Quarterly* (submitted for peer review on May 18th, 2020).
- Kalfa, S., & Taksa, L. (2015). Cultural capital in business higher education: reconsidering the graduate attributes movement and the focus on employability. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(4), 580-595. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.842210>
- McQuaid, R.W., & Colin, L. (2005). The concept of employability. *Urban Studies*, 42(2), 197-219.
- McQuaid, R.W., & Lindsay, C. (2005). The concept of employability. *Urban Studies*, 42(2), 197-219. <https://doi.org/10.1018/004209842000316100>
- Minocha, S., Hristov, D., & Leahy-Harland, S. (2018). Developing a future-ready global workforce: A case study from a leading UK university. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 16(2), 245-255, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2018.03.002>
- Moreau, M.P., & Leathwood, C. (2006). Graduates' employment and the discourse of employability: A critical analysis. *Journal of Education and Work*, 19(4), 305-324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080600867083>

- Pellegrino, J.W., & Hilton, M. L. (2012). Education for life and work: Developing transferable knowledge and skills in the 21st century. Washington, USA: National Academies Press.
- Small, L., Shacklock, K., & Marchant, T. (2018). Employability: a contemporary review for higher education stakeholders. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 70(1), 148-166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2017.1394355>
- Tomlinson, M. (2010). Investing the self: structure, agency and identity in graduates' employability. *Education, Knowledge & Economy*, 4(2), 73-88.
- Tomlinson, M. (2017). Introduction: The political economy of graduate employability, In, Tomlinson and L. Holmes (Eds.). *Graduate employability in context* (pp 1-40). New York, USA: Springer.