

Bridging the boundaries between critical theory, technical knowledge and generic skills: Teaching and assessing employability in the curriculum. (0126)

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In the current political context where the future of Higher Education in the UK is likely to include wide ranging cuts in government funding and the potential privatisation of some aspects of teaching in Higher Education, it is significant that employability outcomes have become specifically linked with funding provision. This can be seen both in the Higher Ambitions Higher Education Framework from the previous Labour government and also in recent speeches from the Conservative/Liberal Coalition Minister for Universities and Science David Willetts. In these he has introduced the idea of UK universities having to publish 'Employability statements' which 'will summarise what universities and colleges offer students to help them to become job-ready in the widest sense and support their transition into the world of work' (Willetts 2010).

This situation raises a number of issues for teaching, learning and assessment as well as student experience. The challenges universities face are raised over issue such as what skills and competences employers require from students, and also whether the 'academy' is the appropriate place to deliver these. Debates run within all universities about whether employability skills can or should be assessed within in the curriculum, or whether they are best delivered in some sort of personal development planning format alongside other modules. Other important questions relate to student perceptions of what they expect from their university experience in terms of skills acquisition, as well as the implication of certain modes of learning on their ability to become independent learners, which ultimately raises bigger questions related to the role of university in society.

This paper is based on research collected around a new level 2, 15 cats points curriculum based employability module in the social science discipline of Criminology, that was done as part of a research project funded by C-SAP (The Subject Network: Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics). The paper will make reference to the qualitative and quantitative data collected from students on the module about their perceptions of studying employability in the curriculum, as well as contributions from criminology alumni and a sample of employers. Evaluation will also be made of data collected in two 'world café conversations', one consisting of academic staff from disciplines apart from criminology, including social science, politics and international relations, and the other consisting of a mix of university careers professionals, employers, students and academic staff.

Yorke and Knight (2007) argue that there are a variety of responses from academic staff about employability issues in the curriculum ranging from the generally positive to worries about leading '...higher education away from its pursuit of truth'. In this research example, whilst academic staff were broadly supportive of the module believing that it had the potential to give students goals which made them more focussed on their academic study, they did have a number of concerns. For instance some staff saw the introduction of this type of module into the curriculum as taking away valuable teaching time that could be spent on discussing 'more important' theoretical issues. They also identified that students often see this type of learning as 'less valuable' in comparison to subject specific academic modules. More generally academics such as Christie (1993), have expressed anxiety at what he sees as a management ideology which is putting 'the old university standards of critical thinking...under strain [where] students become more equipped with answers that solve administrative problems...[rather] than with critical questions that only complicate [the issue].

In the knowledge of these concerns the module attempted to address these in that it attempted to bridge the boundaries between critical academic theory, academic methodology, technical knowledge and generic skills. The module covered academic concerns, getting students to reflect on pertinent issues such as organisational cultures; managerialism and power, as well as getting them to apply methodological techniques such as discourse and content analysis to their personal reflections. It also promoted the acquisition of technical knowledge by the use of lectures by practitioners and contributions from alumni and university careers staff. Generic 'transferable' skills were developed by students being expected to be responsible for leading and directing seminars and by being encouraged to treat the module in the same way as they would treat employment. For the assessment, the module required the students to produce what was described as a 'professional development file' where they had to show evidence of competences in an number of academic, reflective and technical tasks. This was designed to create a foundation from which they could develop as independent learners, encouraging them to develop a range of systems and practices that should facilitate their future career planning.

The research showed the students were mostly very positive about the module and felt that the academic/skills balance worked well. There were a number of issues raised by the module however in terms of student expectations about employability and what they believed that the university should provide for them and this potentially had implications for their development as 'independent learners'. As well as this there were questions, raised for the staff working on the module, in respect of maintaining good practice and consistency when marking complex non traditional assignments.

Whilst this paper uses a social science module as a case study to explore the relationship between Higher Education and employment, the issues related to teaching, learning and assessment as well as student perceptions and experience are relevant beyond the social sciences. In embracing the skills debate through a pedagogic and learning strategy we were able to start to identify how employability and skills were understood by students, employers and academics, and feed this back into learning and teaching at a grass roots level to try and improve student experience.

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