

The development of self belief in HE: considerations of context and control.

Importance of developing self belief in HE (0267)

Turner Nancy¹, ¹*University of the Arts London, London, United Kingdom*

Self belief has been proposed as a central component of employability in recent research and models produced by HEIs. The main argument levied for the necessity of their consideration is based on critiques of current HE pedagogic and curricular research that fail to focus on the 'self theorising' that underpins good disciplinary learning (Yorke & Knight, 2004 p.26). Without the belief that one can apply one's understanding and skills one cannot demonstrate nor meaningfully utilize one's understanding and skills. There has however, been a paucity of exploration of how self belief is defined and developed in HE. It is taken at face value that development of understanding, skills and, with the more recent additional of personal development planning and reflective practice in HE curricula, metacognition, result from higher level learning, these same assumptions cannot be made for self belief. The danger in these models therefore is establishing a set of attributes that students should have on graduation with only 3 of 4 actually developed through HE study. Success and claims to employability would therefore only result if one brought self belief with them to the HE experience. If we do not interrogate the process by which self belief is developed in HE we risk setting up such an experience. This would surely undermine the widening access agenda of the HE sector and would run counter to the possibility of emancipatory education that most institutions would no doubt aspire to achieve.

Defining self belief

Research and models of employability to date have either not defined self belief or have considered belief in one's personal abilities with little consideration of beliefs about the environment in which ability is enacted. In addition, while the importance of the development of skills within the disciplinary context has been convincingly made, to date, no model of employability has presented a conceptual argument for self belief developing within this same contextual space. Building on several decades of research on self belief (Dweck, 1999), self efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and perceived control (Seligman, 1975, Rotter, 1966) self belief is proposed as a student/graduate able to enact understanding and skills through:

- Belief that their ability can be developed and improved to allow for attainment of their goals;
- Belief in their ability to plan and execute action to achieve their goals;
- Belief that the environment/context will allow for goal attainment.

Taken together belief in one's ability and perceived control are a powerful combination in enabling use of skills and understanding to achieve success. A combination of these three beliefs considered in context facilitates self belief to be used to predict performance but, more importantly, be developed through specific experiences within the HE curriculum or in broader HE experiences allowing for development of it alongside and through development of disciplinary understanding and skills.

Structures to enable self belief

An individual's perception of ability to act, develop one's ability and enact that ability within a particular environment in combination reflects one's agency in a particular situation. What then needs to be considered is how agency is constrained or enabled by the structures of a particular context. Agency and one's ability to enact it cannot be considered devoid of the structure in which it is being exerted (Ashwin, 2008) and the characteristics of the structure that either facilitate or block it.

One of the strengths of considering context in a model of employability is that we balance the focus between what a student has or is lacking with considerations of how the context enables feelings of ability and control and enables agency. This balance has been lacking in employability models to date that have focused on stable traits with interventions suggested to 'educate' students about their beliefs or perceptions in efforts to affect them (Dweck, 1999, Yorke & Knight, 2004), or change these traits through interventions resembling cognitive behavior therapy (Martin & Marsh, 2003). Personal perceptions are not created in a vacuum. Perceptions of control and ability develop in a broader social system and will be negotiated on an ongoing basis through experience and participation in social situations. This perspective has not been taken to date by the employability literature and is scant in considering all areas of curricula and pedagogy in HE (Ashwin, 2008).

Considerations of structures in curricula (micro), extra/co-curricular activities (meso) and opportunity for student participation in educational change (meso and macro) are important for HEIs in providing opportunity for development of self belief and facilitating agency in students through their HE experiences.

References

- Ashwin, P. (2008). Accounting for structure and agency in 'close-up' research on teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 47 (3), 151–158
- Dweck, C. (1999). *Self-Theories: their role in motivation, personality, and development*. Philadelphia, PA: The Psychology Press.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self Efficacy: the exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company.
- Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs*, 80, 1-28.
- Seligman, M.E.P (1975). *Helplessness*. San Francisco: Freeman.
- Yorke, M., & Knight, P. (2004). Self-theories: some implications for teaching and learning in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(1), 25-37.