

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Higher Education for a Collective Approach to Work

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Abstract: Present approaches to employability within higher education presently prioritise supply-side considerations, with higher education institutions looking to equip graduates with skills appropriate to the available employment opportunities. Such approaches, though, fail to take into account the role that collectivities play within working life, and the possibilities for graduates to pursue projects other than just focused on self interest and economic rewards. This study explores the role that collectivities play in work, and the ways in which higher education is able to prepare students to make contributions to collective agendas through their work. It identifies a set of causal tendencies by which Higher Education can support different forms of interaction within collectivities, leading either to the elaboration or reproduction of the collectivities. In this way we address whether there are ways for Higher Education to contribute more directly to establishing flourishing societies.

Paper: Introduction

The term 'employability' has come to the fore in higher education across the world in recent years. The dominant view frames employability as part of a supply-side problem, with higher education institutions equipping graduates with skills and qualifications appropriate to the available employment opportunities. Boden and Nedeva (2010), furthermore, argued that employability is defined by institutions in terms of personal attributes, and that this 'reflects notions of education as a transformative and essentially personal journey.' As a result, employability is seen to entail the potential that an individual has to bring suitable capacities to the work setting, with higher education viewed as a form of investment in a project of the self for economic reward. Boden and Nedeva (2010) further suggested that the outworkings of such understandings of employability have meant that universities have become strongly focused on the pursuit of economic utility. Donati (2012), however, has suggested that future economic crises, on the lines of those experienced in the early 21st Century, can only be avoided if societies reduce their structural dependence on the State and for-profit market economies, instead incorporating attention to networks of social relations.

This exploratory study aims to explore the extent to which higher education can support an approach to work that is not simply determined by individuals interacting with markets under the influence of policy established by States. The debate around employability presently remains framed within a structural analysis that fails to take into account the collective dimension of the agency that is open to graduates. It is true that it is individuals who possess the capacity to contribute to a collective effort, but it remains the case that dominant perspectives on employability undercut the possibilities for collective action by framing employability around the individual pursuit of economic reward. This study thus addresses the following research question: What role do collectivities play in work, and how might higher education prepare students to make contributions to collective agendas through their work? In this way we address whether there are ways for Higher Education to contribute more directly to establishing flourishing societies.

Research

approach

In seeking to take into account a collective dimension to the agency of graduates, it is possible to build on the work of Cashian (2017). He suggested considering employability from a critical realist perspective. Cashian (2017) viewed employability as a social phenomenon that needs to be understood and researched, rather than something amenable to a 'definition'. He argued that the current employability discourse lacks a conceptual basis on which to ground such research. Critical realism, however, is helpful in offering a set of levels for analysis. Bhaskar (2010) argued that social reality is characterised by seven layers that are analytically distinct from each other, which include the intra-personal, the individual as an entire person, meso-level structures and entire societies. Causal tendencies are in play at these different levels. When activated, these tendencies give rise to the events that we actually experience. Fleetwood (2011), indeed, has offered a critical realist analysis of labour markets as sets of socio-economic phenomena that are acted on by agents. The analysis offered by Cashian (2017), though, did not consider the relevance of a significant body of critical realist theorising to the debate in hand. Furthermore, he failed to consider any direct connection between employability and emancipation, despite the centrality of emancipation to critical realism. Theoretical analysis that is opened up through critical realism offers a means to develop the discourse around employability, and to deliver on the study's research question.

The contribution of Higher Education to collectivities in work settings

The study explores a set of causal tendencies by which work entails a contribution to a collective agenda, drawing together a body of existing research. Thompson and Vincent (2010) have argued that the agency of groups plays a key role in a range of workplace labour processes. The work of Archer (2003) on that form of agency by which a group of actors engender structural elaboration (that is, corporate agency) is also relevant, allowing analysis that straddles the individual and the market. Donati (2012), furthermore, has argued that there is scope to ground economic life in social relations within which the subjects are reciprocally oriented to each other. On such views, collective aspects of labour are directly linked both to one's own flourishing (which would include economic returns to the individual) and to the public good. It is surprising that there has been little attempt in the literature to draw together the research that does exist on the nature of the collectivities that are implicated in learning in Higher Education.

In addition to considering the role played by both collectivities within Higher Education and the

workplace, the analysis builds on a recent empirical study by Lundgren-Resenterra and Kahn (2019), which explored how students were prepared to contribute to the elaboration of organisations. The programme engendered both social relations and the capacity to maintain different modes of collective reflexivity on the part of students. Such reflexivity concerns the individual deliberations that subjects employ together to take forward their social relations. In this way either the established agenda of the organisation was advanced or new directions were opened up for it. The study concludes by addressing considerations that might lead institutions of higher education to focus on forming their students for collective as well as critical stances in relation to their working lives.

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