

## **Scaffolding professional, personal and disciplinary identity within Sociology; BA Sociology approach to 'employability' and career development**

Before introducing the BA Sociology approach to 'employability' it is worth taking some time to conceptually contemplate 'employability' and how it relates to other important sociological and social scientific concepts and how this has influenced curriculum design.

The arena of 'employability' has a history that springs from the concept of career development (see Watts 2006; Yorke and Knight 2006). Tony Watts – a prominent figure within the field of career policy – accounts for such a history (Watts 2006). Watts asserts how notions of employability link to notions of career development learning – incorporating aspects of career management and lifelong learning. In doing so Watts (2006) encourages a broad exploration of employability to move from the notion of 'immediate employability' – commonly concerned with student possession of attributes to obtain a 'graduate job' and being 'work ready' – toward 'sustainable employability' – a concern with the ability not only to secure a first job but also to remain employable throughout life. It is within this realm of employability that Watts argues that career development learning can come into play. Watts' argument is that the encouragement of career development learning and the utilisation of career development theory can provide a broader approach to employability – and therefore avoid the conceptual narrowing of a skills approach, which according to the literature is unpopular with students (see Atkins, 1999; O'Regan, 2009). What becomes apparent is that although Watts' intentions are laudable his broadening of the employability curriculum stays tightly contained within a rational paradigm that overly embraces the agented notion of career enactment of the student. Much of Watts' argument concentrates upon deployment – the extent to which individuals 'are aware of what they have got and how they choose to use it'. There is little scope within Watts' argument to provide space in the curriculum to contemplate how wider social configurations – very much an interest for the sociology curriculum - influence the student's career enactment – ideas heavily espoused by Roberts, (2009); Bathmaker et al (2013); Young and

Vallach, (2000); Patton and McMahon (1999) and the discipline of the Sociology of Work (Fleming 2009 – see Gee 2016 and 2017 for more detail).

Phil McCash (2008), another contributor to the HEA Employability and Learning series, asserts for conceptually widening the employability agenda by the encouragement of career studies. Building upon the arguments of Yorke and Knight (2006), as well as resonating with Lawy's (2006) notions of connective learning, McCash promotes the notion of employability connecting with *multiple discourses* so as to include a *student's home subject of study*, as well as *other/further disciplines* so as to promote a transdisciplinary exploration of career.

As 'employability' has sprung from the genealogical roots of career development it is worth noting conceptual configurations of 'career'. The Oxford on-line dictionary definition of career provides a good starting point with interesting cultural insights into the concept of career.

A course of professional life or employment, which affords opportunity for progress or advancement in the world –

On-line Oxford English Dictionary accessed June 2011

This definition like many on-line definitions is concise and to the point and reflects the layperson's usage of a word. The idea of work is central to the above definition, as work is presented in the guise of employment and a career is only induced if such employment is of a professional nature and encapsulates the philosophy of enlightened thinkers - that of 'progress'<sup>1</sup>. One can quickly realise that such notions of career appear exclusive. One in a position without employment, or a person in employment that does not 'progress', or those looking after the long term sick, or looking after children or relatives, even people of 'leisure' are all deemed career-less. It is also interesting how notions of learning or studentship are to fit with such a

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<sup>1</sup> Gellner's (1972) sociological analysis explores how the project of the Enlightenment has provoked a yearning for countries to 'progress' and how such one dimensional notions of progress have influenced collective and individual thought. The concept of progress is depicted as that which provides a 'secularised salvation' and meaning to an ideological and historical understanding.

definition. This is a paradigm that excludes people from career and one which makes career vulnerable and in a position to be 'broken' – such as the notion of a 'career break'<sup>2</sup>. Such notions also resonate with definitions from the business school

The evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time –  
Arthur (2010)

From a social science perspective both Donald Super (1994) and Ervin Goffman (1961) would challenge the above definitions. Donald Super, from a social psychological perspective, would suggest that the development, sequence and combination of the roles we play within the life span constitutes an individual's career. Such a perspective therefore brings many roles into play, for example the role of student, parent, citizen as well as the role of worker. Ervin Goffman, a prominent sociologist, very much harmonises this view by suggesting that careers can encompass an individual's social strands, that which is significant to the individual that connects aspects of their personal narrative together, e.g. housing, caring and leisure as well as work careers. The metaphor of strand allows the student to conceptualise how aspects of their life interconnect, and how during certain episodes they may also be placed in tension, especially during times of transition<sup>3</sup>. It is via the conceptions of career as strands (Goffman 1961), career studies (McCash, 2006 and 2008) and connective learning (Lawy 2006) that the Sociology degree has considered the placement of 'employability' within its curriculum, where 'employability' is seen as an important strand that interconnects with many others, so as to enable the construction of a life career narrative of the situated student in an interconnected global world (see Gee, 2006 and 2017 for more detail).

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<sup>2</sup> Gallos' (1989) feminist critique of the masculinisation of career exposes how there is cultural pressure for women to break their working careers so as to take on the traditional task of being a primary carer of children, the common usage of a 'career break', as opposed to a 'work break', provides a dominant reading of the importance of paid work over unpaid caring duties

<sup>3</sup> Transition as a concept is heavily entwined with the duality of being and becoming. Trans, means to 'cross'. Transition thus evokes a sense of movement, a crossing from one state, stage, status and/or environ to another. To do so evokes a contemplation of the displacement of being and becoming, where transition is an important subset of career (see Gee 2017)

Taking the above into account the BA Sociology has embedded 'employability' – as an interconnected strand in the student's life career - throughout their Assessment Schedule, including employability-focussed modules in all years, an alternative employability-focussed capstone project option and several non-traditional assessment types which mirror professional practice, and identity construction, more than traditional academic essays so that 'employability' and career development is integrated throughout the assessment diet e.g.

- Year 1 core module 'Sociology and the Real World' (20 credits) students complete a 'Becoming a Professional Sociologist 1' Portfolio of materials Group tutorials
- Year 2 core module 'Sociology work placements' (20 credits) students complete a 'Becoming a professional sociologist 2' Portfolio including reflection on the work placement and proposal for dissertation research. This carries on from the portfolio in year one and links with year 3 through the dissertation proposal.
- Year 2 optional non-traditional assessments to mirror professional practice: blog entry, activism plan, reflection on a tourism site, policy briefing.
- Year 3 core module 'Sociology of work and careers' students complete a reflective report 'Becoming a professional sociologist 3' This carries on from the portfolios in year one and links with a research project where students interview two respondents about work and careers.
- Year 3 core 40 credit module students can undertake a 40 credit dissertation OR a report for a local organisation.
- Year 3 optional non-traditional assessments to mirror professional practice: policy report, book proposal, multimedia project, policy issue timed exercise.

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