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## Critical Educators Should Embrace the Employability Agenda

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### Abstract

Graduate employability, as a desirable outcome of higher education, is a concept that is widely opposed by educators who practice critical pedagogy. Employability, it is argued, reinforces capitalist expectations, exemplifying the anti-democratic hollowing out of education over the last four decades. The central argument of this essay is that employability is not a concept that educators can ignore. Indeed, inherent in the development of desirable graduate attributes and employability skills, there are opportunities for critical educators to support students in the development of their social awareness and sense of civic autonomy. This essay will further argue that educators who seek to opt out of the employability agenda are failing to live up to their own values of seeking a truly equal partnership of learning with their students.

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy, employability, graduate attributes, praxis

### 1. Introduction: What is the challenge?

Employability is an ill-defined topic in the academic literature. Romgens et al. (2020) argue that the central feature of the most influential definitions is that employability is central to a person's perceived ability to successfully sustain employment over the course of their career. For educators in the critical tradition of Freire, Boal, Giroux, and others, the concept of employability as a desirable outcome of higher education is seen as being in opposition to academic goals (Rees, 2021). In this short essay, I will argue that critical educators should embrace the opportunities in the space that employability occupies in the higher education landscape because competence and character development lend themselves as readily to the development of critical social engagement as to professional efficacy.

Although the phrase was never used by him, the concept of critical pedagogy is understood to be substantively derived from the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. For Freire, students' experience of education is inextricably linked to the oppressive societal structures in which they find themselves, and educators must therefore engage with issues of social power to illuminate the inequity of their students' material conditions. Through dialogue and reflective analysis,

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educators and their students engage in a reciprocal exchange of ideas in the development of critical social consciousness (*conscientização*).

## **2. What is employability and how have critical educators responded to it?**

Employability, in much of the literature, is viewed through the lens of one's skills (Bridgstock, 2009; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Knight & Yorke, 2002), but increasingly the focus has been shifted to a broader view which proposes the acquisition of additional resources that will enable graduates to respond effectively to the shifting demands of a knowledge economy-driven labour market (Cole & Donald, 2022; Nimmi et al., 2021). This narrative has sought to take account of the 'supply side factors' of employability (macroeconomic circumstances, the volume of labour demand, incentivised investment, geographical considerations) which are significant factors in an individual's ability to find appropriate employment opportunities irrespective of their perceived level of employability (Clarke, 2017).

For critical educators, giving increasing prominence to employability as an intended outcome undermines the emancipatory potential of higher education, disconnecting academia from "larger civic issues and social problems" (Giroux, 2014, p. 17). Maïa Pal (2022) argues that rather than being peripheral to the neoliberal agenda, employability is central to its transformation of higher education and, by extension, wider society. That the wholesale and uncritical adoption of market ideology would serve to reify the language and norms of late-capitalist exploitation is an issue that must not be taken lightly – but is not the point of being a critical educator that we do not do *anything* uncritically?

Giroux argues that education has come to be seen as "job training" and certainly, there is merit to this argument. Despite the wealth of literature that cautions against this, governments tend to measure a graduate's employability through the blunt tools of money earned or employment held. As Clarke (2018), Cole & Donald (2022), and Nimmi et al. (2021) among others have shown, a person's employability goes far beyond their ability to secure well-paid employment, and their ability to secure well-paid employment is dependent upon so many more factors than their employability. Consequently, I agree with Giroux that we need to reframe education as something that goes far beyond ensuring work readiness, but I do not believe that it is possible for faculty to flout the employability agenda in pursuit of this goal. Maïa Pal (2022) makes the excellent point that ignoring employability is simply not an option for most educators anyway. To be blunt, decades of neoliberal reforms and increasing academic precarity make it practically impossible for educators to not accommodate employability in their teaching.

## **3. Why is the exclusion of employability by critical educators problematic?**

Irrespective of the impracticality of simply ignoring employability, I would argue strongly that opting out on students' behalf is a thoroughly *uncritical* position to adopt. Deciding on behalf of students what concepts they should be allowed to engage with and placing boundaries upon how much of the reality of their situation they may be permitted access to strikes me as thoroughly undemocratic and disempowering. In *Rules for Radicals*, his seminal text on community organising (after all, what else is faculty but a community?), Alinsky (1971) contends that one must "make the enemy live up to their own book of rules" (p. 129). Peter McLaren (2017) exhorts faculty to "recognize and attempt to transform those undemocratic and oppressive features of hegemonic control that often structure everyday classroom existence" (p.

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64). It is my contention that educators should exploit what Sutton (2015) calls the “small spaces of praxis” (p. 45) that exist within the employability agenda. In seeking to engage students in developing their own understanding of their lived conditions and of the social forces that shape and limit their existence, educators are facilitating students’ development of an enhanced awareness of their own capabilities and values. In this way, students can reach an understanding of the ways in which their futures (including their employability) are determined by a combination of their selves and their material circumstances and can make more enlightened choices in postgraduate life as a consequence.

#### **4. Making the case for engagement with employability**

For what is employability? Theorists have argued that it is a combination of desirable skills and attributes such as self-sufficiency (Hillage & Pollard, 1998), metacognition (Knight & Yorke, 2002), personal adaptability (Fugate et al., 2004), and self-efficacy (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). This limited range of examples from a wealth of scholarship serves to make a very simple point: employability is often used as shorthand for skills and attributes that will enable students and graduates to understand and successfully navigate life beyond university, both in and out of work. It strikes me that developing these attributes in an informed and transparent manner that engages with structural inequalities and labour market volatility, may also give radical graduates the tools to reimagine a fairer society and build transformative communities. Embracing the employability agenda would move the critical response to employability from a position of rhetorical hostility and pragmatic compliance and reposition it as an intellectually coherent, radically transformative pedagogy. This critical approach to employability is entirely congruent with the more recent conceptualisations of employability that move beyond ‘skills for jobs’ and embrace a more diverse range of outcomes (Clarke, 2018; Cole & Donald, 2022).

To be reassured that this critical approach to employability would be capable of implementation in a neoliberal higher education sector, let us turn away from the academic literature and look more closely at what capitalism demands of our students when it uses the phrase employability. Recent publications from industry bodies demand that graduates demonstrate the capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving (Chartered Management Institute, 2021), problem-solving, resilience and communication (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019), problem-solving and teamwork (Chartered Institute of Professional Development, 2022). To address the employability agenda and enable students to develop the attributes that the labour market requires, capitalism demands that university education should develop students with the capacity to develop robust responses to challenging problems.

#### **5. Practical suggestions for embracing employability as a critical educator.**

Freire (1970) wrote that “The truly committed must reject the banking concept [of education] in its entirety” (p. 34), and this has been taken to mean that employability must be rejected, as must all neoliberal impositions. But this is a flawed interpretation, for the banking model of education refers to the pedagogic *process* of dispensing knowledge to passive learners and not to the *outcomes* of their education. In the same passage, Freire continues, “they must abandon the goal of deposit-making and replace it with ‘problem-posing’ education” (p. 34). The problem-posing pedagogy that Freire calls for requires collaborative sense-making of personal aspirations, structural barriers, and hegemonic constructs. These are radical uses of the desired

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graduate attributes of critical thinking, problem-solving, resilience, communication, and teamwork. Critical educators can legitimately respond to the demands of capitalism by framing their liberatory pedagogy and consciousness-raising in the language of employability: teamwork, resilience, communication, and problem-solving.

Critical educators who are given the task of developing students' employability should embrace the opportunity to explicitly outline those expectations (this is what the graduate labour market expects), explore with students the context in which they are required to make sense of and demonstrate those expectations (these are the capitals that this requires) and support students in developing their informed personal responses (including whether to opt-in or opt-out and how best to perform the role that serves their own interests).

## 6. Conclusions

Critical educators should not segregate their students from the employability agenda as though they were parents shielding a child's eyes to avoid having awkward conversations. A genuine partnership between academics and students is not built by placing limitations upon what information a learner can be trusted with. Employability and, indeed, the expectations of the graduate labour market are inescapable realities. They are the students' lived sociocultural conditions, and it is incumbent on us all as critical educators to support learners to fully understand these realities and thereby make conscious and informed choices in negotiating the world that awaits them.

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