

'We wanted to change that particular part of the world': the role of academics in the career development field, learning from the career of Tony Watts

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This article uses a career case-study with Tony Watts to explore the interface of an academic career with policy and practice. It finds that, in Tony's case, public engagement was driven by a social and political mission. Such engagement is shaped by both the institutional arrangements within which the academic is situated and the political and organisational structures of the part of the world into which they try to intervene. While it is difficult to generalise from a single case, the article concludes by suggesting some key themes which academics may wish to attend to in navigating these issues of engagement and the nature of academic roles.



Introduction

Since 1975 a core value of NICEC has been the idea that research and intellectual enquiry can play an important role in the field of career development. However, the role of academics is often conceptualised by both politicians and practitioners in a narrow way around the concept of 'evidence'. This can position policy-makers and practitioners as 'those who do', and academics as 'those who check it works'. For those of us who undertake this kind of work, such a conception is likely to be viewed as much too limiting. However, the role of academics, researchers and intellectuals in the career development field has hardly been theorised at all. While there is broader literature looking at academics' roles and more generally at the role of intellectuals in society (e.g., Posner, 2003;

Cummings, 2005; Collins, 2011) there is little thinking specific to our field.

This article seeks to explore these issues through a case-study of Tony Watts' career. This offers a useful way of looking at the issue of academic engagement with wider social and political forces. Career describes how individuals live within their society; a career case-study examines the individual through the lens of their working life. In this particular case, the case-study recognises that the role of 'academic' is an occupational category and that an academic career results from the intersection of individual characteristics and decisions with the institutional, historical and political context.

Tony Watts requires little introduction to readers of the NICEC Journal. He has played a leading role in the career development field for 50 years, along the way founding or co-founding CRAC, NICEC, the British Journal of Guidance and Counselling and the International Centre for Guidance Studies. Those interested in finding out more about the development of these institutions are well served by a range of recently published histories (Smith, 2010; Hyde, 2014; Watts, 2014a; 2014b). This article will use his career case-study to explore a range of key themes in Tony's career, rather than viewing it chronologically. In particular, it will use Tony's experience to examine the tensions that exist within an academic role and the different ways in which such roles can interface with policy and practice. The article will draw on Tony's reflections to explore issues which others may encounter in different contexts.

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The rest of this article is largely composed of an 'idealised' record of a conversation that took place between the author (Tristram) and Tony Watts (Tony) in Derby on Wednesday 26 November 2014. The conversation is 'idealised' in three ways: (1) the transcript has been edited to be read rather than heard; (2) it has been reorganised to highlight key themes within the constraints of a short journal article; and (3) Tony has been asked to review the article and adjust the transcript to aid clarity.

The role of the academic

Academics can take a range of different roles and adopt a number of different attitudes. Tony's work includes attention to public policy and is addressed to a wide audience and motivated by a 'social mission'. In this respect, Tony's reflections on the role of an academic help to illuminate what a 'public' or 'socially engaged' intellectual looks like, as well as highlighting some of the tensions in this role. In his particular case, it came from a wider range of career roots:

Tony: When I was an undergraduate at Cambridge, I had three or four different career ideas and actually I've used all of them in my career. A career is not necessarily about choosing between alternatives: it can also be about identifying themes and then finding ways of combining them. I was interested in doing a PhD in history, in journalism, and in publishing: all linked to activities I'd been involved with as a student. I'd also done a year of school teaching, which I'd really liked and thought I might go back to. But I thought I wouldn't be a good researcher or teacher if I'd been in education all my life. So I wanted to go out into the wider world, for a while at least. There was also a bit about wanting to do something socially worthwhile: I'd been involved with a student group running holidays for refugee children.

What I did was to work for a publishing company which happened to publish careers books. Then Adrian [Bridgewater] and I started talking, saying that this was an interesting and important field in which much more needed to be done. So we started talking about setting

up a non-profit organisation, which is what became CRAC.

Then I started reading and to realise that this was actually quite complicated. I read Donald Super's (1957) *Psychology of Careers*, Peter Daws' (1968) *A Good Start in Life*, Martin Katz' (1963) *Decisions and Values* and others, and I thought: this is really intellectually interesting. So I started to think that I wanted to do something that was more serious, for which I needed additional intellectual tools. So I thought: I've got to go back to university.

Tristram: The idea that 'I need a bit more theory or I need a process of thinking about things': that isn't something that people who are running organisations often think.

Tony: I think that I felt I needed a chance to do some serious reading and thinking. Helping to run CRAC was very demanding: reading was always on the edge. So as much as anything, going back to university was about getting some space.

One of the core values that emerges as Tony discusses his career is the centrality of reading to his conception of what an academic's distinctive role is. Broad reading, in and beyond your discipline, provides you with a strong intellectual foundation and an understanding of how your work can build upon the work of others.

Tony: I'm constantly aware of the narrowness of my reading. I try to read broadly and I try to read whatever is available. I have read a lot, but not as much as I would have liked. If you put career at the heart of what you are concerned with, it touches so much. It's in the end about the relationship between the individual and the wider society. There are massive bodies of theory which discuss this and I feel I have touched the surface of much of it.

Alongside the centrality of reading, writing also has a parallel place within Tony's conception of academic practice:

Tony: Writing is the core, because once you've written something you know what you know, and

you've got something that you can work off. Until you've written it, there's nothing of substance there. Once there's something down on paper, once you've got that, then you've got a basis on which to engage in activities that can influence action.

Reading and writing are central to the practice of many academics, but Tony has also been willing to get involved in a much wider range of activities including public communication of ideas, journalism and supporting lobbying. It is clear that Tony was not simply building an academic career, but pursuing wider goals:

Tony: I think in the end it comes down to a social mission. It was the social mission that we started CRAC with: that people making choices and developing their careers is really important, both for their lives and for the wider society. No-one was doing anything very serious about this. We wanted to change that particular part of the world. So rather than being an academic who starts with an academic career and then thinks about how can I have an impact, I started from the other end: thinking about wanting to make a difference, but then realising that it needed strong intellectual foundations. I've always thought: 'How do we develop this field of human activity and provide it with strong intellectual roots?'

Tony is clear that the way in which he was thinking and developing his career emerged out of a milieu of like-minded people. He is describing what it is to be a public academic, but also part of a movement for change. The existence of such a movement clearly provided a helpful context for the development of his own approach to being a publicly engaged academic:

Tony: In the seventies there were a number of people around who I had lots of conversations with, including Peter Daws, Barrie Hopson, Bill Law and others. They all influenced me a lot and we shared a lot in common. We all thought that it was important: that it was intellectually interesting, but we all wanted to do something. I think that the way we developed the organisational structures at that time and the way our own careers have evolved have all been about that.

The influence of context

One of the unusual features of Tony's academic career is that he has pursued it largely from outside universities. He has been variously based in CRAC, NICEC and OECD and more recently as a self-employed consultant, with Visiting Professorships at Derby and Canterbury Christ Church. This has provided him with a different context from many other academics. It is clear that this context shaped Tony's career and the forms that his academic work took:

Tristram: When you went to York to do an MPhil, was the idea always to go back to CRAC?

Tony: Well, Adrian and I argued a lot, but we never fell out: we kept conversing. When you've started an organisation, you can take it any way you want. I wanted to come back, but in a research and development role. So we set up a research role within CRAC. It was a very privileged position.

Tristram: So, why did you decide not to seek a university post?

Tony: I never really thought about it. There weren't that many places that I could have pursued what I was interested in. I suppose the main place was the Counselling and Career Development Unit at Leeds. I used to go there a lot while I was at York and I knew Barrie Hopson and John Hayes well, but I don't think I ever thought this was somewhere I would go.

I think there are advantages to not being fully in a university. I don't think that I ever envied the administrative apparatus or the narrow reward systems of a university. But I very much admire and want to be part of the broad aspiration of the university and its place in society.

So I liked the idea of being based outside, but having a foot inside. That is the way we set up NICEC: in partnership with a university. As it happened, it was with a polytechnic (Hatfield) which subsequently became a university (Hertfordshire), and later with the University of London's Institute of Education. So we had the benefits of being in a university, with its status

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and its values, but also through CRAC the benefits of greater independence and exposure to other influences.

Tristram: I think that it is worth probing this idea of 'independence' a bit more. I don't feel that the university constrains what I think about very much, but it potentially can constrain how you operationalise those thoughts and channels them into particular types of output.

Tony: I think that's an important point. NICEC wasn't set up to just be a research institute: it was also a development and training unit. I thought it was important that we published in academic journals, but this wasn't the only measure. Ironically it was about impact, which is what universities are under pressure to be about now. We certainly produced lots of outputs aimed at practitioners. We also tried to use our resources to build infrastructures that would develop practice.

It is clear that the institution of the university exerts a range of influences on the shape and nature of academic activity. Tony managed to find ways to manage and mitigate these influences by balancing his engagement with and reliance on universities, with a range of other institutions and paymasters:

Tony: I had a peculiar, distinctive route which it is not very easy to replicate and turn into a model. It is linked to thinking about the role of an academic as a public intellectual and questioning how far universities support the development of those kind of roles. Universities are based on a set of values about providing a space where there can be some intellectual thinking and an engagement with civil society. However, at the same time the nature of government funding, inter-institutional competition and the growth of managerialism have made some of that more difficult. The things that now matter in an academic career can drive you in a different sort of direction.

It's all about finding spaces to work in. That's what career is ideally about: about people finding spaces where they can use their talents and do something they believe in. But in order to get that space you've also got to do something that is related to some wider

social purposes, for which people are prepared to pay. The space is never uncontaminated. But if you keep a sense of what you are trying to do, you can find the best spaces you can and try to manage those spaces.

Engaging with practice

A challenge for theorists in a field like career development is that ideas are operationalised by a wide range of practitioners operating in diverse contexts. However, within these constraints Tony feels he has had an impact on practice:

Tony: I think that we were part of changing the way in which careers work was thought of, moving it from a matching process to a learning process. A lot of that was based on the work we did. It did change the field. The concept of career education came from that thinking.

Tony is clear that his role is not simply to theorise and disseminate theory, but rather to engage in dialogue with practitioners:

Tony: A lot of the work I've done has been trying to learn from practice, to conceptualise it and contextualise it in a way that can then enhance practice. What you are trying to do is to find out what people are doing, how they are doing it, and some of the issues and tensions that need to be addressed. If you can do this in a reasonably clear and coherent fashion, then practitioners find that useful. They feel they understand some of their dilemmas better, and can resolve them better, because someone from outside has given them a kind of clarifying mirror.

So then you feed it back. You write and give seminars and lectures. I think that is how it works: it's an iterative process. Professional networks and associations are very important in supporting this process, thereby stimulating better work and innovation: helping people to do things in ways that they haven't done before.

Engaging with policy

Tony has become known as a key commentator on career guidance policy. In recent years in the UK this has included forensic critiques of government policy, recently raising the possibility that 'false dawns' are leading to a 'bleak sunset' for the careers sector (Watts, 2013). However, he remains optimistic. He is also keen to explain that this form of critique is not the only way in which academics can seek to influence policy:

Tony: I always used to go and see civil servants to look for opportunities and to find out what was going on. What were the new issues? At that time it was not about critiquing government policy, but rather about linking what we were doing with policy priorities as they emerged. The NICEC Policy Consultations were about that.

For example, when the Manpower Services Commission was first set up I met with Geoffrey Holland [senior civil servant]. He brought together a lot of creative, innovative people to address youth unemployment. I and others pressed for guidance to be part of this programme and we got funding to design what should be done: research projects, but also developing materials and training people. That was the kind of relationship that we had in those days. We were influencing policy, but it wasn't from the basis of critique. It was identifying problems and helping to solve them, so also finding new spaces to work in.

However, this kind of relationship was dependent on a particular configuration of political power, including able and authoritative civil servants who respected specialist expertise:

Tristram: When I read about the 1960s and 1970s the civil servants are often portrayed as a patrician establishment. Yet what you are describing is very open government, where they are using you to help them think and to access wider civil society. My experience now is that the policy formation process is much more difficult to influence.

Tony: I think that's right. The big change was the rise of the special advisers and the consultancy companies

who basically go in on the Government's terms and tell them what they want to hear and charge big bucks for what they do. They have taken over much of the space that organisations like NICEC occupied. Civil servants have been weakened and don't have the confidence and authority they had. Government is more ideologically driven, more targeted and more controlled.

These shifts in the policy formation process can result in academics being positioned outside the process. This results in a more limited role, often confined to critique:

Tony: Now politicians like Gove come in with half-baked ideas and civil servants have to kowtow to them. That has implications for people like us: we get pushed into this critique role which is not a very comfortable or constructive place to be, but that is sometimes all that's left if you want to retain your integrity.

My critique work started with the 'new right' under Thatcher (Watts, 1991; 1995). But at that time there was a tolerance of plurality, and the range of government agencies provided continued spaces to work in – even though some of our work on unemployment engaged directly with its political as well as economic causes (Watts, 1983; Watts and Knasel, 1985).

The change started with Connexions. I worked in the way that I had always worked, talking to civil servants and Ministers, but I lost access. So I published a critique (Watts, 2001), which in retrospect proved right but had no effect at the time.

Alongside this critique role, Tony also explored a range of other approaches to influencing policy in more challenging times. One was to try and position career development as a major policy theme which was capable of engaging with the big policy concerns of government. In a series of papers (Watts, 1994; 1996; 1998) he made the argument that career guidance was a public good and that it should be central to the formation of public policy:

It reduces drop-outs from education and training, and mismatches in the labour market. It offers

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benefits to education and training providers, increasing the effectiveness of their provision by linking learners to programmes which meet their needs. It offers benefits to employers, by helping employees to come forward whose talents and motivations meet the employer's requirements. And it offers benefits to governments, in two ways: by fostering efficiency in the allocation and use of human resources, and by fostering social equity in access to educational and vocational opportunities (Watts, 1998: 5).

Through Tony's work at the OECD (2004), European Commission and World Bank, this position has received influential official endorsement internationally. Alongside this he also played more political roles within the UK in supporting the lobbying of governing and opposition parties, and in the convening of civil society around both the immediate concerns of the careers sector and the broader idea of career as a public-policy theme. His role in the development of the Guidance Council (Alloway, 2009) and the Careers Sector Strategic Alliance provide notable examples. However, engaging in this kind of political activity does raise issues for an academic:

Tony: There are tensions between trying to play a political role and continuing to be an academic. You have to try to retain some degree of detachment and respect for evidence. Sometimes when things become polarised you have to make a decision about where you stand and what your primary allegiance is. That was ultimately why – with Heather Jackson – I resigned from the National Careers Council in 2013: I felt I could not accede to the collusive position the Council was adopting, and the way the process was being managed. It was one of the most difficult and controversial decisions I ever had to make, but I am clear that it was the right one.

If you are trying to build an academic position, you've got to retain credibility based on integrity. You've got no power: all you've got is the authority of your distinctive voice and the fact that you can claim it to be based on evidence and reasoned argument. You can't allow that to be compromised, because as soon as you do, you lose your voice. You can play

other roles but you have to be clear that if being an academic is your primary role, then the other roles have to be reconcilable with it, and in the end subordinate to it.

Conclusions

Tony is a successful public intellectual; however, we should be cautious about extrapolating his career as a model for ours. Tony's career began in the 1960s and 1970s when career development was emerging as a field and when the relationships between politicians, civil servants and academics were different to now. Nonetheless, it is still possible to extract a number of principles that Tony adheres to and which have continued relevance for future generations of academics.

Tony's career has been built around a strong social and political mission. A motivation to change a part of the world has underpinned his enthusiasm and his wish to participate in the political process. The willingness to knock on doors, to build relationships and institutions and to address a wide range of audiences has been critical in this attempt to make a difference. However, Tony's story also highlights tensions between political and academic activity.

Such tensions can perhaps be theorised by viewing academics as participants in a pluralist civil society. Academic engagement is not simply a process of one-way 'knowledge transfer', but rather an attempt to engage in dialogue with other stakeholders in civil society. Where this has worked for Tony, it has been a long-term and iterative process.

A number of key academic values of integrity, expertise and reflexivity underpin successful participation in the public sphere. Alongside these values sits an ability to understand the distinctiveness of your role and to balance the expectations of a range of institutions.

Studying the careers of others offers us a powerful tool for reflecting on our own career. As Tony retires from the career development field to move into the next phase of his career, it offers us an opportunity to learn from his experience. There is much that we might learn about values, integrity, and approaches to

engaging with policy and practice. However, in all of this the reality of a career case study reminds us that while we make our own careers, we rarely make them totally in the circumstances of our own choosing.



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