10.20856/jnicec.4403

Change it up, change the system! Exploring career development learning and social justice through action research

Anne Delauzun

Careers practitioners are encouraged to embrace social justice as a core value, but to what extent can it truly guide practice given the operational and institutional constraints within which many operate? This paper presents a practical example of a career development learning intervention drawing on theories of social justice. Informed by student consultation, the workshop engaged participants in collaborative learning on themes such as the gig economy and the gender pay gap. This innovative example of a non-deficit approach succeeded in attracting and engaging a diverse group of participants, fostering peer-to-peer and transformative learning.

Introduction

A great deal has been written about the relationship between career education and social justice, and whilst many helpful theoretical concepts and questions are raised (for example Irving, 2010; Bassot, 2012; Sultana, 2014), there is a dearth of practical examples of how such ideas might be implemented in context (Arthur, Collins, Marshall & McMahon, 2013, p. 137). I undertook some action research as a small step towards remedying this situation. The following article offers insights into the practicalities of developing a career development learning (CDL) intervention informed by social justice, and the successes and learning that resulted.

Rationale

Social justice is perceived by many as a key component of careers guidance practice (Arthur et al., 2013; Christie, 2016). If careers guidance can enhance social justice, as has been argued (Sultana, 2014, p. 317), the way in which this guidance operates will surely depend on the interpretation of social justice adopted by its practitioners. Whilst a large proportion of higher education careers services offer targeted initiatives for groups of students who are likely to face barriers to entering the labour market (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services [AGCAS], 2018b, p. 22) for example, many prominent examples of these (e.g. ACGAS, 2018a) appear to align with a progressive approach to guidance (Watts, Law, Killeen, Kidd & Hawthorn, 1996/2016, p. 174). This assumes that 'the individual's interests are best met by seeking to achieve the highest level that is possible within the status hierarchy of the opportunity structure' (Watts et al., 1996/2016, p. 174). There are clearly many benefits to this strategy (AGCAS, 2018a). However, it could also be argued that such approaches risk an uncritical adoption of a deficit model, in which career problems are located within individuals, doing little to 'address social conditions that adversely impact people' (Arthur, Collins, McMahon & Marshall, 2009, p. 23). The primacy of competition is another feature of this progressive approach, and indeed one promoted by the team within which I work, where students are encouraged to 'compete for success in the graduate labour market' (The University of Reading Careers Centre, 2018). Drawing on a radical approach to career guidance (Watts et al., 1996/2016), Hooley offers an alternative to this within his framework for emancipatory career education, asking the questions: 'How does the world work? How can I live with others? [And] how do I go about changing the world?' (2015, p. 15). Informed by this perspective, I set out to explore how to raise awareness of alternative and varied means of self-actualisation that serve the interests of the 'common good', as well as the individual (Sultana, 2014, p. 14).

This work also offered an opportunity for increasing student engagement with careers support (a continuing concern in higher education settings) by appealing to a new and different audience. For those possessing a strong orientation towards the labour market and high levels of agency, what Hooley identifies as a conventional approach to career education (2015, p. 15) appears to be a good fit. Otherwise, however, the appeal is less clear. Law too argues that a new model of careers support is needed to best support this significant group (2009, p. 4). An approach to CDL that considers alternative narratives could perhaps encourage a broader definition of success, including scenarios in which fulfilment and self-actualisation are achieved by means other than a 'graduate job' or even paid work.

Through the process of action research, I set out to answer the following three questions, and the remainder of this article outlines my responses.

1) How can I design a career development learning intervention informed by perspectives on social justice?

2) What can I learn about my practice from delivering a career development learning intervention informed by perspectives on social justice?

3) Reflecting on my responses to these two questions, what are the implications for practice?

Designing a career development learning intervention

I designed the CDL intervention through a process of triangulation, drawing on a number of key sources and concepts, my own experience as a careers professional, and student input gathered via a small-scale consultation. Key literature informing the work included Learning Work: A critical pedagogy of work education (Simon, Dippo & Schenke, 1991) - helpful in its practical application of the critical pedagogy theories of Freire, Giroux and others to the context of careers or work education; 'Socio-Political Ideologies in Guidance' (Watts et al., 1996/2016), in which the political nature of careers education and guidance is discussed; and Career Guidance in Communities: A Model for Reflexive Practice (2017), in which Thomsen takes the collective, rather than the individual, as a starting point for careers education and guidance. Mignot's (2001, pp. 93-4) conceptual framework for anti-oppressive practice provided a helpful representation of some of the discourses of social justice and, critically, the tensions between them. I used this in the CDL intervention as a means of conceptualising some of the ideas and themes arising from the group discussion on the subject of the gig economy. Mignot's (2001, pp. 94-95) WISE principles for day-to-day anti-oppressive practice also informed the way in which the workshop was designed and delivered. The WISE principles, WISE being an acronym for 'Welcome, Image, Support and Empowerment', offer a form of 'practical politics' (2001, pp. 94-95) to guide the work of careers practitioners, engaging 'both the fundamental and the strategic questions that relate to anti-oppressive practice' (2001, pp. 94-95).

Student consultation

Collaboration is an important element of action research and involving students in the design process also mitigates against what Mignot (2001) describes as associational injustice – people having things done 'to them' rather than playing an active role in the solution themselves (p. 94). Ensuring the workshop was relevant to students was important in increasing its appeal, especially given the perhaps unfamiliar nature of the topic. The experience of relevance also has a bearing on if, and how, people participate in careers guidance (Thomsen 2017, p. 8), which I have certainly observed as a practitioner. In order to be experienced as relevant, Thomsen suggests career guidance should provide 'a context for action in which participants join forces with career guidance practitioners to analyse, problematise and create new and shared opportunities in relation to their future educational or vocational participation in society' (2017, p. 8).

I undertook a consultation by interviewing (individually) two students (described here as Students A and B) who responded to a call for volunteers. Thomsen suggests discussion with participants as a

form of exploration through which relevant themes to guide the design can become apparent (2017, pp. 14-15), and this was the key aim of my consultation. I developed an interview guide with suggested questions to explore participants' awareness and understanding of social justice in the context of careers, incorporating clarifying and summarising questions as a way of building in some light analysis to the interview and to verify my interpretation (Kvale, 1996). This approach proved successful in eliciting a 'lightbulb moment' of transformative learning from Student B: 'We're just given the resources to go into the world how it is, we're not given the resources to change it…change it up, change the system!! – I think that's really important!'.

When asked about their understanding of social justice in relation to career, both interviewees raised the topic of diversity of role models, particularly in the context of their university and broader education experience. Student A commented on their observed lack of working-class backgrounds or regional accents in those teaching classes or workshops, whilst student B asked 'Oh, ok…where's all the females? Aren't I supposed to be inspired to be like you, but…there's no-one like me there?'. This theme recurs throughout both conversations and suggests a lack of visible, relatable, or 'flesh and blood' role models (Law, 2009). This has wider implications for the work of careers practitioners in general. A second prominent theme emerging from the consultations was the idea that lack of information, resources and tools was a barrier to action. Parallels could perhaps be drawn here with Bates' example of students seeking a programme to meet their 'socially structured' concerns of local labour market and salary information (1990, p. 74), when careers practitioners attempted to move away from a focus on information. This was taken account of in the design of the CDL intervention, with the inclusion of some content relating to specific information and resources, in order to meet this perceived need.

The workshop

The input from the consultation was balanced with my own ideas (as the facilitator) so that 'taken-for-granted ways of thinking' could be challenged. The outcome of this triangulation process was the following two-hour extra-curricular workshop, delivered in June 2018 and made available to all students at the University of Reading:

> **Title:** ' I want to make a difference': Social justice and your career
>
> **Aim:** To increase understanding of social justice as it relates to career, and inspire action to promote it.
>
> **Learning outcomes:**
>
> **1)** Interpret two contrasting narratives about the labour market.
> **2)** Discuss the potential impact of these narratives on themselves and others.
> **3)** Apply strategies of individual or social change ('playing the game' or 'changing the game') to a labour market problem.
> **4)** Compare the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies.
> **5)** Propose actions they can take to promote social justice through their career.

All materials needed to deliver the workshop including a session plan, slides and handouts are now freely available online (Hooley, 2019).

Delivering the workshop: successes

Mitigating against associational injustice through collaborative design

Conducting a consultation informed the content of the workshop and, to some extent, mitigated against associational injustice. The broad appeal and relevance of the workshop could be evidenced by diversity of participants (in terms of ethnicity, level and subject of study, and gender) - a larger group than average for the time of year. All of those who gave feedback (15 of the 16 participants) reported enjoying the workshop, and all but one reported that they had found it relevant. One participant approached me at the end of the workshop to thank me, commenting how she hadn't realised that the Careers Centre offered workshops on this theme and how she thought it was important that they did. This feedback also emphasises the

innovative nature of this workshop, particularly when viewed in contrast with the workshops around CV writing and interview preparation with which careers services are perhaps more widely associated and which are commonly more instrumental in nature. Encouraging students to engage with a topic in a deeper, more critical way, as this session did, is perhaps more closely aligned with the way in which students learn within their academic disciplines. I believe this parity is important if career development learning is to be viewed as credible and relevant by *all* students.

Achievement of aim and outcomes through collaborative learning

The overall purpose of the workshop was to 'increase understanding of social justice as it relates to career and inspire action to promote it', and I believe that broadly, this was achieved. A striking feature of the student feedback is the extent to which participants valued the collaborative approach. One commented that 'the session was engaging and the debate was a great strategy to promote participation from the students. It encouraged creative and critical thinking', another that 'it was really good to have the time to talk things over in groups'.

Observing the groups as they prepared for this debate on the gender pay gap (individual change versus societal change), and as it was conducted, I noted several salient points being made. Those arguing for individual change proposed schemes to increase women's confidence, negotiation and networking skills. Improvements to government-funded childcare provision and advocacy for more equitable sharing of parental responsibilities were argued for by the societal change group. Education was cited by both groups as a valuable tool for furthering their respective causes. My colleague, who was observing the session, reflected to me later how, enabled by the structure of the workshop, she observed the group 'gain their own momentum' (T. Lyden, personal communication, June 6, 2018), suggesting progress of a group who, for the most part, didn't outwardly appear to be motivated to take action at the start.

Everyone appeared to participate in the reading and discussion of two contrasting newspaper articles on the topic of the gig economy, and the innovative use of contemporary mainstream news articles (Denham, 2018; Jones, 2018), proved particularly effective in highlighting the wider relevance of the topic beyond the classroom. I witnessed students describing the authors' use of emotive language, the way in which images were used to enhance a particular narrative, and the citing of research to support an argument. Conversations I overhead in the groups suggested transformative learning was taking place. It seemed that many participants hadn't previously considered the broader implications of what they, as consumers of ride hailing apps such as Uber and Lyft or food delivery services such as Deliveroo or UberEats, had experienced as cheap and convenient services.

At the end of the session, all participants described the actions they planned to take to promote social justice following the workshop. The specific detail included in some of these actions offered a strong indication that these had been well-considered. Examples included 'Look into HeForShe and Lean In movements. Have a discussion with my friends, (especially male friends) about social justice and gender equality' and 'Find out the gender pay gap in the property industry'. This first example is particularly noteworthy as the HeForShe campaign was introduced to the discussion by another workshop participant. To measure Praslova's 'Behaviour Transfer' criteria (2010), I contacted all participants via email five weeks after the workshop and two responded to confirm that they had indeed followed through with actions.

Towards the end of the session I observed several students explaining to their peers with some passion and enthusiasm about specific causes or movements with which they were already involved or familiar with. Others appeared to be noting down names and details or asking for more information. Both the resulting actions and the process through which they were produced is further evidence of the success of the collaborative elements of the session design. As Simon et al. suggest, the sharing of information and discoveries made that take place through collaboration mitigates against constraints on learning such as time and access to information (1991, p. 16). This also offers an opportunity for participants to 'join forces and enjoy mutual support' (Thomsen, 2017, p. 13).

Delivering the workshop: Challenges

Harnessing the affective dimension of learning

Interestingly, participants were reluctant to share their personal feelings about the issues discussed with the wider group during the article comparison exercise, and no responses were forthcoming when I asked the group for their personal feelings on the topic of the gig economy. In the 18 months since I delivered this workshop the theme of the gig economy, and the broader concept of decent work, has been tackled in mainstream television and film – for example in *Years and Years* (Davies & Cellan Jones, 2019) and *Sorry We Missed You* (O'Brien & Loach, 2019). Although fictional, the latter is based on extensive research into the lived experiences of those working in the gig economy (Poirier, 2019) and as such offers a valuable reference point. My colleague observing the session suggested that more exploration of, or focus on, the affective element could have perhaps increased motivation, and commitment to action (T. Lyden, personal communication, June 6, 2018). A key point of reflection discussed in our debrief conversation was whether the workshop could have been structured, or delivered, differently to accelerate this process, and therefore increase the likelihood of action. In repeating this session, I would look to increase the emphasis on affective elements, perhaps by encouraging feelings to be shared anonymously, or by further personalising the debate activity with a family scenario, for example.

Facilitation

Throughout the workshop I encountered dilemmas around how to facilitate, e.g. how far to challenge, question, or give my own viewpoint and which themes or ideas to explore further. Simon et al. propose the classroom as 'a site for the interrogating of competing claims to truth' (1991, pp. 17-18). However, at times it seemed that perhaps because some assumptions were so deeply rooted, or because the variation in experience was more limited, some truths were accepted uncritically. An example of this was a discussion on encouraging men to take a greater role in caring for dependents. Whilst participants agreed that employers could encourage this by promoting shared parental leave opportunities, there was no recognition of the structural barriers that are likely to impact on the actual take-up of such opportunities. As a working parent myself, I have experienced this first-hand. I realised that I had expected participants' prior awareness of such issues to perhaps be more developed than the contributions suggested, and, on reflection, I questioned whether I should have shared more of my own lived experience with the group. This balance between giving power and ownership of the discussion to the participants, versus providing more input as the facilitator to expose tacit assumptions felt complex to navigate when there was a clear political dimension to the discussion, given the widely-held view that careers practitioners should remain impartial. In discussing this theme with other careers professionals, I encountered deeply-held views on both ends of the spectrum.

Implications for practice

Working within communities

Running these workshops within pre-existing communities could increase impact and engagement (Thomsen, 2017), particularly given Law's argument that 'students' […] career management is more influenced by what happens between them and the people they spend the most time with' (2009, p. 2). In higher education, this could be achieved by partnering with student-led societies. Previous research into the impact of peer influence on career behaviour (Delauzun, 2016), and experience of delivering other careers workshops in partnership with student-led groups (e.g. Delauzun, 2015) suggests that these collaboration initiatives often succeed in reaching those who were not actively engaging with other careers service provision. At a national level, delivery within existing communities could be facilitated through partnership with relevant student-facing organisations such as UpReach, the Sutton Trust, or Student Hubs. At the time of writing, I am working with colleagues in the Careers team in partnership with RUSU (Reading University Students' Union) staff and sabbatical officers on Social Impact Week. This week of workshops and events is designed to stimulate interest in, and increase understanding of, jobs and career paths offering potential for social impact. Taking inspiration from the individual versus societal change debate, a member of my team is co-delivering

a workshop as part of RUSU's Student Representation conference. It will be interesting to evaluate the impact of this partnership, and to what extent engagement increases as Thomsen suggests (2017).

Curriculum input

Given that 'a fairer society' is one of the purported aims of the Department for Education's (DfE) Careers Strategy (DfE, 2017, p. 3), I believe that workshops such as this could make a valuable contribution. The Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum at key stages 3 and 4 includes learning opportunities around different types of work and workplace rights and responsibilities, changing patterns of employment and attitudes and values in relation to work and enterprise (PSHE Association, 2017, pp. 29-31). There is clearly some alignment between these and the workshop I designed and delivered, and therefore embedding a version of this work into a PSHE curriculum could helpfully contribute to schools' and colleges' ability to meet the Gatsby benchmarks, as required by the Careers Strategy (DfE, 2017).

Beyond formal education

There is also scope for the workshop to be adapted for delivery with groups outside the formal education sector altogether, building on Law's ideas around pre-vocational franchise (1986). A growing number of organisations in the private and not-for-profit sector work with people of all ages on various aspects of careers and work-related learning for whom this topic could be usefully explored. Given that recent research into the future of work has predicted that by 2028, 'societal responsibility will decide between the life and death of an organisation' (Deutsche Telekom, Detecon International and Henley Centre for Leadership/Henley Business School, 2018, p. 12), the learning from this research could in fact be applied in any work-related environment. The authors propose 'human-centricity' as 'a necessity to address societal divisions and inequality gaps and create sustainable societies' (Deutsche Telekom et al., 2018, p. 12) and workshops such as this could offer a simple first step for organisations beginning this journey.

Conclusion

Through this research I have reflected on the shortcomings of a system and taken practical steps to improve it, and in doing so contributed an innovative example of critical praxis to the literature (Hammond and Wellington, 2013, p. 37). I have learnt much about my own practice and feel this process has made me more acutely aware of the political nature of careers work and the potential influence of my own political sensibilities on my current role and indeed my future career. I have found myself more readily questioning graduate recruiters and employers' approaches and explanations and listening with a more critical ear to the career and labour market stories I encounter. Sultana describes social justice as 'an unquenchable thirst that keeps us ever on the alert…for more equal, more equitable, more just, more fair social relations' (2014, p. 322). Through sharing and discussing this research with others within and beyond the realm of careers work, I have been heartened to meet many who share this thirst.

References

AGCAS (2018a). *Phoenix*, 153, http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/5d002027#/5d002027/1 (accessed 20 February 2018).

AGCAS (2018b). AGCAS HE careers services survey, https://www.agcas.org.uk/Knowledge-Centre/b671b272-c0fe-40b4-85dd-1c19b529ddd6 (accessed 15 September 2018).

Arthur, N., Collins, S., McMahon M., & Marshall, C. (2009). Career practitioners' views of social justice and barriers for practice, *Canadian Journal of Career Development,* 8, 1, 22-31.

Arthur, N., Collins, S., Marshall, C. & McMahon, M. (2013). Social Justice Competencies and Careers Development Practices, *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 42, 2, 136-154.

Bassot, B. (2012). Upholding equality and social justice: A social constructivist perspective on emancipatory career guidance practice, *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 21, 2, 3-13. doi: 10.1177/103841621202100202

Bates, I. (1990). The politics of careers education and guidance: A case for scrutiny, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 18, 1, 66-83. doi: 10.1080/03069889000760071

Christie, F. (2016). Careers guidance and social mobility in UK higher education: practitioner perspectives, *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 44, 1, 72-85. doi: 10.1080/03069885.2015.1017551

Davies, R.T. (Writer), & Cellan Jones, S. (Director). (2019) Episode 4. In J. Leather (Line Producer), *Years and Years*. Manchester: Red Production Company.

Delauzun, A. (2015). Reaching the Ritualists: supporting student-led activities, *Phoenix*, 145, 5 http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/561ec328#/561ec328/1 (accessed 29 September 2015).

Delauzun, A. (2016). Opportunity or risk for higher education careers practitioners? An exploration of peer influence on career behaviours, *The NICEC Journal*, 37, 55-60.

Denham, A. (2018). *The gig economy is the future and women can lead the charge*, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/business/everyone-benefiting-gig-economy-apart-women/ (accessed 29 May 2018).

Department for Education (2017). *Careers strategy: making the most of everyone's skills and talents*, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-strategy-making-the-most-of-everyones-skills-and-talents (accessed 15 September 2018).

Deutsche Telekom, Detecon International and Henley Centre for Leadership/Henley Business School (2018). *Work 2028: Trends, Dilemmas & Choices*, https://assets.henley.ac.uk/defaultUploads/PDFs/news/Study-WORK-2028-TRENDS-DILEMMAS-CHOICES-Henley-Centre-for-Leadership-Deutsche-Telekom-Detecon.pdf?mtime=20180830143818 (accessed 13 September 2018).

Hammond, M. & Wellington, J. (2013). *Research methods: the key concepts,* Abingdon: Routledge.

Hooley, T. (2015). *Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery: self-actualisation, social justice and the politics of career guidance*, Derby: International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

Hooley, T. (2019). 'I want to make a difference' – Social justice and your career, https://careerguidancesocialjustice.wordpress.com/2019/06/14/i-want-to-make-a-difference-social-justice-and-your-career/ (accessed 15 June 2019).

Irving, B.A. (2010). Making a Difference? Developing Career Education as a Socially Just Practice, *Australian Journal Of Career Development*, 19, 3, 15-23. doi: 10.1177/103841621001900304

Jones, O. (2018). *Talk to Deliveroo Couriers. See a Dystopia that could be your future*, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/24/deliveroo-couriers-dystopia-union (accessed 29 May 2018).

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Thousand Oak, CA: Sage Publications.

Law, B. (1986). *The pre-vocational franchise: organising community-linked education for adult and working life*, London: Harper and Row.

Law, B. (2009). *Building on what we know: Community-interaction and its importance for contemporary careers work*, http://www.hihohiho.com/memory/cafcit.pdf (accessed 10 August 2015).

Mignot, P. (2001). Anti-oppressive practice, in B. Gothard, P. Mignot, M. Offer and M. Ruff (eds.) *Careers Guidance in Context*, London: Sage. (ebook accessed 11 February 2018).

O'Brien, R. (Producer) & Loach, K. (Director). (2019). *Sorry We Missed You* [motion picture]. United Kingdom: Sixteen Films, BBC Films, Les Films du Fleuve, Why Not Productions, Wild Bunch.

Poirier, A. (2019). *Ken Loach on 'Sorry We Missed You' and the grim reality of the gig economy*, https://www.ft.com/content/1bf94bc4-f3fb-11e9-bbe1-4db3476c5ff0 (accessed 18 January 2020).

Praslova, L., (2010). Adaptation of Kirkpatrick's four level model of training criteria to assessment of learning outcomes and program evaluation in higher education, *Educational assessment, evaluation and accountability*, 21, 3, 215-225. doi: 10.1007/s11092-010-9098-7

PSHE Association (2017). *PSHE Education Programme of Study: Key stages 1-5*, https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/system/files/PSHE%20Education%20Programme%20of%20Study%20%28Key%20stage%201-5%29%20Jan%202017_2.pdf (accessed 15 September 2018).

Simon, R. I., Dippo, D. & Schenke, A. (1991). *Learning work: a critical pedagogy of work education*, New York, NY: Bergin and Garvey.

Sultana, R. G. (2014). Career Guidance for Social Justice in Neoliberal Times, in G. Arulmani, A. J. Bakshi, F. T. L. Leong, & A. G. Watts (eds.) *Handbook of career development: international perspectives*, New York: Springer.

Thomsen, R. (2017). *Career Guidance in Communities: A Model for Reflexive Practice*. Derby: International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

University of Reading Careers Centre (2018). *Compete*, http://student.reading.ac.uk/essentials/careers_and_professional_development/compete.aspx (accessed 9 March 2020).

Watts, A. G., Law, B., Killeen, J., Kidd, J. M. & Hawthorn, R. (2016). Socio-Political Ideologies in Guidance, in T. Hooley, & L. Barham (eds.) *Career Development Policy & Practice: The Tony Watts Reader*, Godalming: NICEC. (First published in 1996).

For correspondence

Anne Delauzun,
Careers Consultancy Manager,
University of Reading

a.h.delauzun@reading.ac.uk