A framework for analysing careers and employability learning outcomes

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Abstract

This paper describes the development of a framework designed to aid the critical analysis of the theoretical and ideological assumptions underlying the stated learning outcomes of curricular and non-curricular careers and employability education activities. The framework was developed by integrating a learning-oriented definition of employability with a rationalised set of graduate capitals and explicit considerations of social justice. The framework differentiates between the performative and transformative functions of graduate capitals and introduces the novel concept of critical capital. Locating learning outcomes within the framework should enable careers educators and researchers to identify patterns which could indicate inherent theoretical and ideological biases and blind spots in careers and employability education.

Keywords: Higher education career services; employability; career capital; career learning

The context of careers and employability in higher education

The last decade has seen an increasing drive to integrate careers and employability learning into the mainstream curriculum of higher education (HE) institutions as a way to ensure that all students are given an opportunity to benefit from support (Winter &

Yates, 2021). The highest level of integration is the inclusion of careers and employability education within curricular teaching and assessment. This has led to an increased focus by careers professionals on pedagogical principles such as the formulation and assessment of learning outcomes related to careers and employability and how best to integrate those outcomes with subject specific learning outcomes. Should they be grafted in as outcomes that are obviously related to careers and employability and distinct from subject learning outcomes (inserted), or should the existing subject learning outcomes be modified to enhance their relevance to careers and employability goals (extracted) (Daubney, 2020)? The answer to these questions is often determined by the willingness of university teaching staff to accept careers and employability learning as a valid aspect of learning within an academic discipline or, at least, to view it as beneficial rather than harmful. However, some academics see the integration of careers and employability education as not just an encroachment on scarce teaching time but as a threat to the rigour of their discipline (Speight et al., 2013). Perhaps part of the problem is the tendency for HE career services, when they do gain access to the curriculum, to develop learning outcomes that are focused mainly the acquisition of skills and attributes that are perceived as being only attractive to employers, in what Leonard Holmes (2013) has termed a 'possessive' approach to graduate employability. Such approaches often contain unquestioned, and even unarticulated, theoretical assumptions about the nature of employability and ideological assumptions about the purpose of careers and employability education.

A potential, but frequently unrealised, benefit of this increased focus on pedagogy by careers professionals is the opportunity to critically examine all careers and employability activities as educational endeavours, even if they are not part of the formal curriculum. Many of the extra-curricular and co-curricular activities of HE careers services are undertaken for reasons of political expediency, financial pragmatism or just traditional expectations rather than a systematic analysis of their potential learning outcomes based on clear and explicit theoretical underpinnings (Winter & Yates, 2021).

A framework for analysing learning outcomes

In developing the module *Strategic Approaches to Careers and Employability in Higher Education* as part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning & Teaching in HE at the University of London, we wanted to develop a framework to help course participants to identify and reflect on the theoretical and ideological assumptions underlying the stated learning outcomes of curricular and non-curricular careers and employability learning activities as a starting point for critical reflection on their approach.

The framework consists of two elements:

- a simple hierarchical taxonomy to evaluate the level or depth of careers and employability learning implied by the outcome

- a set of possible domains the in which learning could occur which is sufficiently comprehensive to encompass a range of factors that contribute to graduate employability

Our assumption here is that outcomes associated with deeper levels of learning in a particular domain indicate that a higher value has been placed on that domain, as the achievement of such outcomes require more investment by the educator and the student. Depth of learning is, therefore, a proxy for the importance placed on particular aspects of employability by the educator. The distribution of high value learning across different domains would, therefore, provide some indication of underlying priorities and assumptions in the learning design.

Defining depth of learning

For the purposes of the framework we needed a taxonomy of learning that was hierarchical in order to analyse the level of importance associated with each outcome. There are a range of such learning taxonomies we could have used (Biggs & Collis, 1982; Bloom et al., 1973). However, these often focus on the cognitive domain of knowledge or have different hierarchies for affective and psychomotor domains. Instead, we used a simpler learning hierarchy embedded within a definition of employability which frames employability development as a learning activity rather than just a process of acquiring attributes desired by employers.

> Employability means that students and graduates can discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work that benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

> (Oliver, 2015, p. 59)

This definition clearly places employability as a life-long learning task linked to the discovery and creation of meaning through work-related activities. In addition, the verbs 'discern', 'acquire', 'adapt' and 'enhance' provide a concise and useful hierarchical taxonomy of learning processes which enables us to assess the intended depth of learning in any proposed learning outcomes. To facilitate analysis of outcomes, we assigned a numerical value to each level, from discerning (1) to enhancing (4).

To facilitate the identification of the relevant hierarchical level of learning, we further sub-divided each of the processes (see Figure 1). In order to 'discern' what is likely to make them more successful, individuals need to be able to recognise and articulate the extent to which particular resources are available and useful to them. To 'acquire' particular employability assets, individuals need opportunities to experiment in various contexts and then reflect on what they have gained from their experiences. To 'adapt' these assets, individuals need to explore the extent to which what they have acquired can be applied in different contexts and be translated between contexts. To 'enhance' their assets, individuals need to be equipped to evaluate the usefulness of their acquired employability resources in achieving their goals and formulate plans to develop their resources further.

Defining learning domains

Oliver's definition of employability suffers from one shortcoming that is common to a number of such definitions — it appears to focus solely on the characteristics of

the individual as determinants of employability ('skills, understandings and personal attributes'). This issue also applies to commonly used cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of learning. They fail to draw attention to the interaction between these individual characteristics and socio-economic factors in the prevailing labour market in determining the individual's likelihood of achieving success (Healy, 2023). One concept which facilitates a focus on this interaction is that of sociological capital, which articulates the relative value ascribed to particular individual attributes within specific social contexts (Bourdieu, 1986). Several authors have attempted to describe the various forms of capital that might be linked to graduate employability, resulting in a number of divergent frameworks (Brown et al., 2020; Clarke, 2018; Lehmann, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). They all tend to include broadly similar concepts of social capital. Lehman refers to 'personal capital', within which he includes relevant work experience or volunteering that might make an individual attractive to potential employers. In contrast, Clarke includes these factors within human capital but separates out career self-management and career-building skills even though it could be argued that they are merely a specific subset of human capital. Brown et al. group a mix of human and cultural capital together under the headings of 'knowing self' and 'knowing how'. More justifiably, Tomlinson includes such enhancing experiences and achievements within the concept of cultural capital. Clarke separates out personality variables and adaptability as important factors influencing employability. Tomlinson includes the latter within what he refers to as psychological capital alongside resilience and self-efficacy. He further goes on to describe identity capital as the extent to which the individual invests in developing work-related identities which is similar to the 'knowing self' grouping of Brown et al.

Rather than just being viewed as individual attributes or 'heroic' character traits, qualities such as resilience and adaptability can be viewed as resulting from the possession of various forms of capital, such as a strong sense of personal identity, supportive social networks, good self-management skills and enriching life experiences (Estêvão et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2022). In developing a useable analytical model, we considered that it would be more economical to combine Tomlinson's concepts of psychological and identity capital into one form of capital similar to 'knowing self' in Brown et al. and to borrow Lehman's misused term personal capital to encapsulate this combination. Lehmann also emphasised the importance of economic capital — the extent to which your access to financial resources allows you to develop other forms of employability capital. Whilst this is an important factor, it is not one that necessarily lends itself to the development of learning outcomes.

Our analysis of these capitals frameworks led us to adopt four types of capital for our initial analytical model:

- social capital – the breadth and depth of an individual's social networks and their value in providing a sense of belonging and in opening access to new opportunities.

- human capital – the breadth and depth of the skills and knowledge that an individual accumulates that are of value to the individual throughout their life and of value to others in particular social contexts

- cultural capital — the breadth and depth of awareness and contextualised behaviours developed though previous experiences and the value they have in facilitating admittance to and credibility within particular social groups

- personal capital — the range and coherence of the contextual identities, values and

meaningful personal narratives that an individual has been able to develop and articulate which enable them to identify with different social groups and maintain a sense of purpose.

The common distinction between bonding and bridging networks in social capital (Claridge, 2018) indicates the possibility that each of the capitals may be used to achieve two distinct purposes. Some capitals may have a *performative* function, enabling the individual to successfully integrate and progress within an existing context under relatively stable conditions. Other capitals may have a *transformative* function enabling the individual to manage voluntary and involuntary change and to successfully transition into new contexts or operate across multiple contexts. It is entirely possible that some of the same capitals will be useful for both performance and transformation.

Performative social capital refers to the strong 'bonding' micro-level networks that promote embedding within a specific context. Transformative social capital refers to the varied 'bridging' macro-level networks that facilitate transitions. Performative human capital refers to the skills and knowledge relevant to and valued within a specific context, development of which usually involves acquiring deeper levels of specific contextual expertise. Transformative human capital refers to the skills and knowledge that facilitate change and transition. This could include so-called 'transferable' skills as well as life-long career management skills. Performative cultural capital refers to achievements and experiences that are highly relevant to the perceived credibility of an individual within a particular existing professional context. Transformative cultural capital refers to the diversity of achievements and experiences that provide evidence of an individual's ability to move between and operate across multiple contexts. Performative personal capital consists of the goals, values and sense of self that enable an individual to strongly identify with a particular professional context. Transformative personal capital relates to the flexibility or diversity of an individual's goals and values and their sense of having multiple identities that allow them to manage change.

It is possible to extend the idea of capitals used for transformative purposes beyond that of transforming the individual to meet the needs of different contexts. We could also consider the possibility of individuals transforming the societal context to better meet their needs or achieve their goals. This led us to explorations of socially just and emancipatory approaches to career development work. In particular, the five signposts to social justice (Hooley et al., 2021) which references ideas from critical pedagogy. Although the signposts seemed to be primarily aimed at practitioners, they could also be considered as potential learning outcomes for students which incorporate personal human, cultural and social capitals of a particularly transformative nature.

The preceding considerations led us to develop the framework by defining a fifth type of capital which could be developed by careers and employability learning:

- critical capital — a set of transformative capitals that enable the individual to develop a critical approach to dysfunctional or restrictive societal structures and empower them to pursue social change.

Unlike the other capitals, this capital is, by its very nature, transformative but with a focus on equipping individuals to drive change rather than just adapt to it. As well as an orientation to social justice, this capital could also be relevant to entrepreneurial education,

which has also been linked to critical pedagogy (Walmsley & Wraae, 2022). According to the Quality Assurance Agency developing an 'entrepreneurial mindset involves students acquiring 'self-awareness of their own enterprising and entrepreneurial capabilities, as well as the motivation and self-discipline to apply these flexibly in different contexts to achieve desired results' and recognising 'themselves as a person who is creative or resourceful; who can translate ideas into actions; or who is prepared to challenge assumptions through critical investigation and research' (QAA, 2018, p. 19).

The resulting analytical framework is graphically represented in Figure 1. This incorporates the five forms of capital that could be developed as outcomes of careers and employability learning activities.

Figure 1.
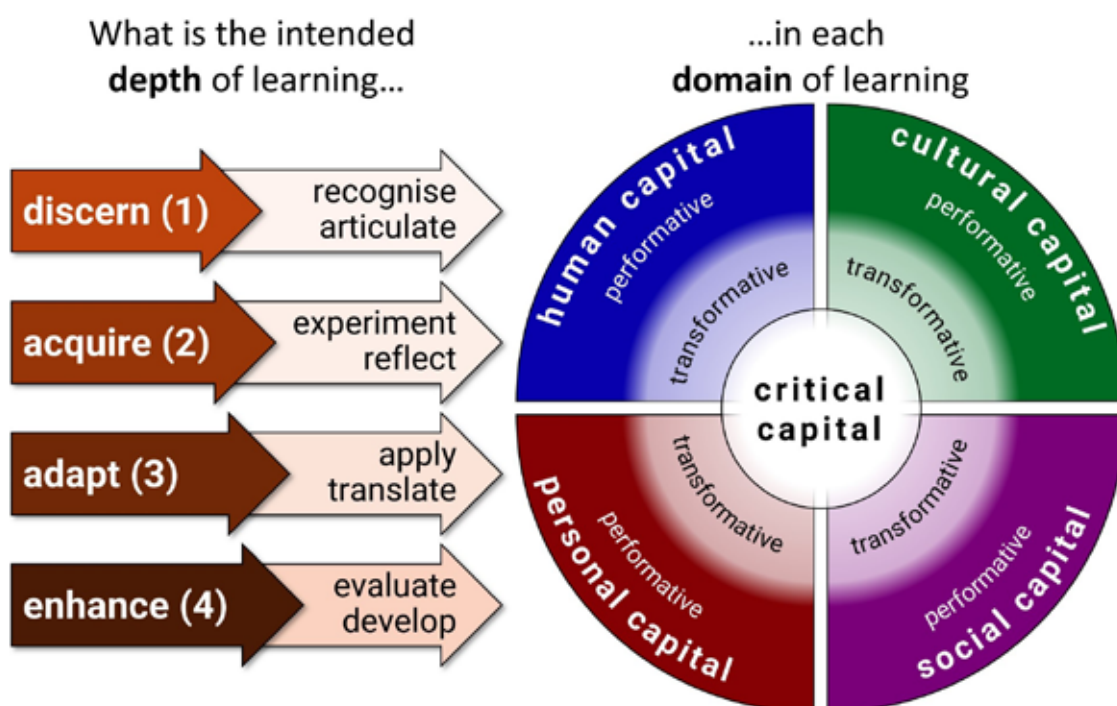
Using the framework to indicate underlying assumptions

To analyse a learning activity, one must examine each stated learning outcome to determine (a) the indicated depth of learning (scored 1 to 4) and, (b) the particular capital domain(s) where the intended learning takes place. Where multiple domains are indicated the depth of learning score is added to each domain.

The extent to which this analysis is possible will depend on how precisely the learning outcomes have been articulated. Difficulty in identifying depth or domain may indicate that learning outcomes are potentially ambiguous.

Once all learning outcomes have been analysed the depth of learning scores in each domain are summed to provide a numerical indicator of the relative importance of each form of capital. Two examples of this analysis are given towards the end of this article.

Assumptions about approaches to employability

In Holmes' (2013) categorisation, a 'possessive' approach to graduate employability will have learning outcomes mainly situated within the domain of human capital, although they may to extend to varying degrees into personal and cultural capital. A social 'positioning' approach will have outcomes primarily situated within social capital, although they may also extend into personal and cultural capital. A 'processual' approach is likely to have learning outcomes distributed between personal and cultural capital as it relates to the claiming and warranting of different social identities throughout various educational and work transitions (Holmes, 2015).

Theoretical assumptions

Learning outcomes mainly located within the domain of personal capital may indicate a preference for subjective definitions of career success, especially if they emphasise the importance of personal meaning and identity (Heslin, 2005). Learning outcomes located in the domain of cultural capital, focusing on concrete achievements and experience, are likely to indicate a preference for objective definitions of career success.

Learning outcomes mainly distributed within the domains of human and personal capital are likely to be related to assumptions of *contest mobility*, where success is deemed to be determined by individual characteristics such as talent, effort and personal motivation (Kinloch, 1969). Such a distribution may also indicate a focus on individualistic, psychological theories of career development. Learning outcomes mainly distributed within cultural and social capital indicate assumptions of *sponsored mobility*, where success is deemed to be determined through acceptance and support from those in positions of power. Such a distribution may indicate an underlying focus on sociologically-oriented career theories.

Deeper outcomes in performative sub-domains, particularly in personal, human and cultural domains, could indicate a tendency towards person-environment fit theories related to how individual characteristics and experience lead to acceptance and success within specific contexts. They may also indicate assumptions that career choice is an event that happens at a limited number of transition points (static or punctuated equilibrium development assumptions).

Deeper outcomes in transformative sub-domains could indicate a tendency towards developmental theories (particularly concentrated in personal capital linked to development of self-concept); or those related to unplanned opportunities driving change (if concentrated in social capital or cultural linked to opportunities created by bridging networks or transformative life experiences) (Winter, 2023).

Deeper outcomes in critical capital indicate an emphasis on social justice approaches to career choice and development or highly agentic assumptions linked to entrepreneurship.

Ideological assumptions

A professional ideology is a set of assumptions about what you believe your role is and what issues you think take priority. Tony Watts developed a framework which presents four potential ideologies underlying careers and employability work, based on whether you prioritise the needs of the individual or the needs of society and whether you see your purpose as supporting the status quo or promoting change (Watts, 1996).

Whilst it is not completely clear cut, a preponderance of deeper outcomes in performative human and cultural capital could indicate a 'conservative' ideology — directing individuals towards meeting the needs of society. Deeper outcomes in performative personal and social capital could indicate a 'liberal' ideology — equipping individuals to pursue their current aspirations. Deeper outcomes across the transformative sub-domains (especially related to personal and social capital) could indicate a 'progressive' ideology — encouraging individual to raise their aspirations and transcend limitations. Deeper outcomes in critical capital indicate a 'radical' ideology — equipping and working with individuals to challenge and change societal structures.

Uses and limitations of the framework

The framework was developed to help careers professionals, academics and university leaders to critically evaluate their approach to careers and employability education by exploring the implicit assumptions behind any intended learning outcomes, whether defined or implied. In particular, we wanted to encourage exploration of the extent to which curricular and non-curricular careers and employability learning had been designed to reflect the mission, values and identity of a particular higher education institution and its socio-political context. It requires learning outcomes to be articulated and their level and domain to be identified. The total of the numerical values of the learning level of the outcomes contained in each domain can then be summed to provide an indication of the weight given to the various capitals in the intended learning outcomes.

Figure 2 shows an illustrative example of completed analyses of the learning outcomes for (a) a work placement module in a social work course and (b) an optional professional skills and employability module in a business school. Both show a preponderance of outcomes in the domain of human capital indicating a mainly 'possessive' approach to employability development. For the work placement module, most of these outcomes were determined to be performative capitals, which is predictable with a vocational course where the students are being equipped to succeed in a pre-defined occupational environment. The employability module, on the other hand, had more of a balance between performative and transformative human capital. This might reflect the wider vocational focus and the need to concentrate on capitals that can be used in transitions between employment contexts. The work placement module also had outcomes located in the domain of cultural capital, with nothing explicit in personal or social capital, which would indicate an ideological focus on the needs of 'society'. This is consistent with a course focused on equipping students to meet the established standards of a professional body. The employability module had some outcomes in the domain of personal capital, with no explicit reference to cultural or social capital. This might indicate contest mobility assumptions about the labour market. Neither module had explicit outcomes in the social or critical capital domains. Whilst it may

not be appropriate for the modules to have outcomes in these domains, analysis using the framework allows us to reflect on whether these omissions are intentional, accidental or indicative of some form of theoretical or ideological bias.

Figure 2.

a. Work placement module   b. Taught employability module
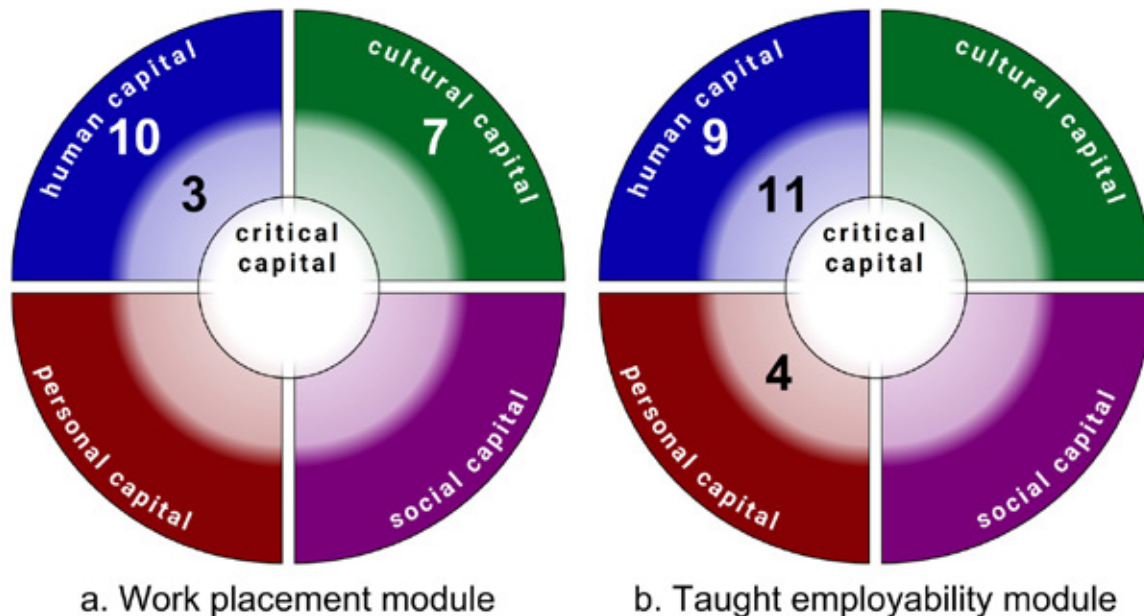
Whilst the framework can be used to highlight certain biases and omissions in the learning outcomes for careers and employability activities, it does not enable an evaluation of whether particular intended outcomes are valid or sufficient. It will not tell you whether you have chosen the right components of human, cultural, social, personal or critical capital to include as intended outcomes. However, it could help to highlight the assumptions behind any theory of change or logic model that underpins those choices. For a relatively concise framework, it allows for a broad but reasonably sophisticated analysis of many of the key theoretical and ideological assumptions underlying the intended outcomes of careers and employability learning activities. As a result, it could be used to prompt an examination of how careers and employability learning activities might be modified in order to have a more balanced range of outcomes.

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