

Taking a Freirean approach: Applying transformative pedagogy to create inclusive careers provision

Keren Coney

Lecturer, University of Derby, UK

Jack Fitzpatrick

PhD Student, Liverpool John Moores University, UK

For correspondence

Keren Coney: k.coney@derby.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article considers the application of Paulo Freire's philosophy of critical pedagogy to the work of developing careers and employability support for autistic university students. Drawing on Freirean principles of critical dialogue, co-creation and praxis, the authors describe their participatory approach to reflecting on inequalities that exist and engaging in transformative action to enhance inclusion. By sharing their reflections and evaluating their work through the lens of Hooley et al.'s *Five signposts to a socially just approach to career guidance*, they present a model for careers practitioners to engage with learners as equals and to develop emancipatory careers provision.

Keywords: Freire, co-creation, praxis, social justice, autism

Introduction and context

In his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Freire asserts that, 'education is not the 'deposit' of knowledge but the praxis of freedom - a practice in which the oppressed become subjects, agents of their own liberation' (Freire, 2000, p. 78). What might this

mean for career practitioners situated in an educational context? Who are the oppressed, and how might they be liberated? In this article, we, a careers practitioner (KC) and a student collaborator (JF), will describe how we and others used a Freirean approach to develop inclusive careers and employability provision in a UK university.

Whilst higher education was initially conceived as a public good and a political and moral practice for the benefit of society, some believe that this has now been 'reduced to a private good' (Giroux, 2010, p. 715). Those who hold this view might conceptualise universities as the providers of skills and capabilities required by employers that will enable economies to maintain their productivity levels in neoliberal societies. Sennett (2025) warns that these higher education institutions, which previously may have supported the development of criticality and transformation of individuals and their contexts, are now at risk of being merely providers of training, measured on levels of employability and student satisfaction. Whilst these are not inherently harmful ambitions, this move potentially limits universities to producers of graduates who are workplace-ready, and is in danger of diminishing students to 'objects whose primary responsibility is reduced to meeting contemporary workforce needs' (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007, p. 347). Liasidou (2014) declares that certain groups of students, such as those who are disabled, are at risk of being excluded due to 'alleged inability to contribute to performance indicators and cope with the competitive 'human capital' marketplace of higher education institutions' (p. 123).

One example of the way in which the critical pedagogy tradition has been adopted within the field of careers is through Hooley et al. (2021)'s *Five signposts to a socially just career guidance*. These authors assert that in a world of power imbalance and injustice, career guidance (and therefore the educator/practitioner involved) has 'the capacity to intervene in this unequal world and support people to flourish' (Hooley et al., 2021, p. 59). However, Hooley et al. (2021) observe that 'the discourse of 'career management' and maximising 'employability' often serves to responsibilise failure' (Hooley et al., 2021, p. 61); this can lead to individuals considering themselves to be to blame for their lack of success, rather than to question the inequitable structures and attitudes that may exist. Some individuals may be disadvantaged both during their time at university and once in the workplace. One such group are autistic students and graduates.

Autism can be understood as a lifelong developmental disability which impacts 'how an individual communicates, processes information and makes sense of the world' (Vincent, 2017, p. 301). Contrastingly, using the lens of neurodiversity, which highlights neurological differences within the human race, autism is viewed as part of the range of natural phenotypic variation (Costley et al., 2023). Despite a growing understanding and acceptance of this neurodiversity perspective, Knapp et al. (2024) note that societal barriers and a lack of appropriate support exacerbate challenges experienced by individuals. Autistic students may be faced with barriers resulting from inaccessible elements of their university careers service, such as the format of careers information and the language used in guidance meetings, or simply perceiving that those who work there lack an awareness of autism (Pesonen et al., 2020; Shaw Trust, 2024). Perhaps it is unsurprising then, that one study found that autistic students were less likely to approach careers centres for input about their future career than family, friends or academic staff (Briel and Getzel, 2014). When it comes to the workplace, this experience of disadvantage may continue, as autistic graduates located in many countries of the world are reported to be less likely to be employed than graduates of any other disability type (Cheriyen et

al., 2021; Pesonen et al., 2021; Toogood, 2025; Vincent & Ralston, 2024). Those autistic graduates who are in work are often underemployed (Baldwin et al., 2014; Pesonen et al., 2020), or mal-employed: engaged in work that is not aligned to their skills and qualification levels (Remington & Pellicano, 2019).

Given the ways in which autistic students and graduates are at risk of being marginalised as described above, the Freirean label of 'oppressed' could well be applied to them. Aware of this context, KC, the careers practitioner, opted to conduct a study which sought to bring about change and justice for this group. The study was located within an emancipatory paradigm and influenced by critical autism studies, which encompass principles of neurodiversity, lived experience and disability justice (Freeman Loftis, 2023). Participatory action research was chosen as an approach, given its alignment with critical theory and aims of transforming not only activities, or the persons involved, but 'the social formation in which the practice occurs' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 17). This concept of a reflective type of research involving autistic students as equal members in the process, working collaboratively to seek to understand the current situation with the idea of eventual greater impact, was ideal for this study. What followed were a series of cycles of action research which adopted a Freirean pedagogy involving critical dialogue, co-creation and praxis. A brief outline of these key features of Freire's philosophical approach to education are given below.

A transformative pedagogy

For Freire, education could never be neutral: it always behaves in a way which fosters either conformity or freedom (Freire, 2000). He declared that education systems could be used to perpetuate social inequalities by reinforcing existing oppressive power dynamics (Freire, 1985). Against an educational background which he perceived as devoid of criticality, Freire proclaimed that education in its broadest sense should be about emancipation, offering students the opportunity to develop critical consciousness, where they deepen their understanding of themselves, their context and the oppressive political powers at work around them. For Freire, pedagogy was not something which should be forced on students, but instead ought to be a 'political and moral practice that provides knowledge, skills and social relations that enable students to explore possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens' (Giroux, 2010). If we are to follow Freire's philosophy, career practitioners working in an educational setting are presented with a choice: to integrate students into society in its current state, or to aid them to become active citizens engaged with self-determination and an awareness of their transformative agency (Escobar et al., 1994). Apple (2003) declares that it is not enough to become aware of the role that education can play in oppressing certain groups, although this is a necessary starting point; there must also be action. But what might this action comprise? Freire asserted that transformative pedagogy consisted of a series of philosophical principles: dialogue, co-creation and praxis. Each of these will be outlined in turn.

Firstly, engaging students in critical dialogue is a key concept of Freire's pedagogy. Through the sharing and debating of ideas, students can develop a deeper understanding of the world (Sennett, 2025). Freire affirmed that dialogue is crucial for human existence and transformation:

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it...Human beings are not built in silence, but in word... If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world,

transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings.

(Freire, 2000, p. 88)

Freire maintained that this dialogue must be authentic, rooted in love and undertaken with mutual respect and humility, leading to trust between those involved. As noted by Sennett (2025), providing opportunities for those who have been disadvantaged is of particular importance: 'through engaging in critical dialogue, the oppressed are exposed to realities and perceptions beyond their personal experiences, enabling them to dissect, question and ultimately uncover the structures that maintain oppression' (p. 17). Some critics of Freire's notion of critical dialogue warn that educators could manipulate students by using teaching to impose their political ideologies on students. Whilst this is an important consideration to be mindful of, Vismara (2021) counters that Freire's strategies are in opposition to such an authoritarian approach, highlighting that his theories are based on open dialogue and discussion, starting from the perspective of the oppressed and with the aim of improving their lives.

Linked to critical dialogue is the concept of problem-posing. Freire argues that if education is to be truly liberating, it cannot apply a 'banking' approach: 'In the banking model of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' (Freire, 2000, p. 72). In this model, the students must passively accept the 'deposits' of knowledge from the teachers, who possess all the understanding. Instead, Freire recommends this 'problem-posing' approach, where teachers accept they possess just one view of the world and, similarly, students must recognise their experience and views of the world are equally legitimate. Freire (2000) argued that problem-posing education 'breaks the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education' (p. 80) and in this way can be a practice of freedom. When this occurs, Freire stated that the 'teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers' (Freire, 2000, p. 80).

A second key concept in Freire's pedagogy is co-creation with students; as noted by Sennett (2025), this principle is at the foundation of Freire's anti-authoritarian approach to education. Here, 'all involved must be equal partners in this process of knowledge creation...no one person can dominate, and no one's voice is invalid' (Sennett, 2025, p. 16). Freire (2000) asserted that the inequalities in society could dehumanise people and that the role of education should be to rehumanise us. In order to achieve this, Freire wanted to re-model the teacher-student relationship to an 'egalitarianism marked with collaboration and partnership' (Morales, 2021, p. 216). As Sennett (2025) avers, co-creation is particularly important when educators are working with those who have been marginalised in the past. Freire highlighted that a challenge for those from oppressed groups can be that they have adapted to their position as marginalised, have internalised it, and therefore have to choose between conformity and becoming their 'authentic' selves (Freire, 2000, p. 48). Coming together to collaborate with others who have experienced this disadvantage can provide these individuals with a way to pursue freedom, to rediscover their authentic selves.

Finally, a third principle of Freire's critical pedagogy is praxis, defined as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 2000, p. 51). Engaging in critical dialogue whilst beginning to play a role in shaping the world around them 'fosters student

recognition that history is created by acts of human agency and can be changed in precisely the same manner' (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007, p. 350). This concept of praxis involves engaging students in reflection of their current situation and thinking about what can collectively be done to work towards transforming this, before acting and reflecting on this action. Freire proposed that participating in this praxis leads to a critical awakening, which Freire called '*conscientização*', or conscientisation (Sennett, 2025). Once students begin to develop this critical awareness, they have the awareness to continue to exercise agency, both individually and collectively (Hooley et al., 2021). Some critics of Freire's concept of '*conscientização*' state that there is a lack of clarity of the process involved in leading to change (Austin, 1995); however Vismara (2021) observes that Freire's adoption of this approach in Chile in the early 1960s, when he was first formulating his philosophy, led to the development of radical awareness. Indeed, Austin admits, '... formidable advances were made which were significantly driven by Freire's energetic team' (Austin, 1995, p. 48); perhaps the detail of the process involved must be determined by the co-creators themselves, as experts in their own contexts.

Putting Freire into action

Understanding the value of adopting a Freirean approach, we employed a co-creation methodology to develop tailored careers and employability provision for autistic students. The project took place over two cycles, comprising two academic years. Given that a key element of praxis involves utilising reflection of prior action to inform the next cycle of action, we have included summaries of our reflections at key points during the project. Reflexivity, the process of critically examining our values, positionality and influence on the various aspects of the project, proved to be an essential aspect and epistemological basis of our work (Cohen et al., 2018). The reflexivity at the heart of the project has helped to deepen our understanding of ourselves and increased the potential for the work to have 'developmental impact' (Somekh, 2013).

Co-creation cycle 1

To start, KC surveyed all autistic students at the university, seeking to obtain ideas about what types of tailored careers and employability provision might be preferable, the topics which might be covered by group provision and when these might occur. In this initial questionnaire, KC also included an invitation to be involved in the development of this tailored provision. These students would be called 'consultants', to reflect the expertise they would bring as autistic individuals with lived experience. Six students responded to this invitation, one of whom was JF.

A first step in the co-creation process was to provide opportunities for the six consultants to communicate with each other to consider the challenges and reflect on the issues that existed. It was important that this dialogue was as inclusive as possible; maximising choice can be a vital enabler of participation, allowing for the differing needs and preferences of autistic people (Haas et al., 2016). For KC, this meant finding out how each student preferred to communicate and providing options; of the six, three chose to participate in online focus groups, two by email and one in one-to-one conversations. Given that dialogue is a key part of a critical pedagogical approach, KC worked hard to share comments back and forth between the three groups, so that the consultants would be able to experience being part of a collective, 'problem-posing' together. In the various modes of dialogue, the

consultants and KC co-analysed the results of the initial questionnaire, discussed the issues including perceived challenges and injustices and decided on the next steps for the tailored provision for autistic students.

One of the key areas of injustice that emerged from the dialogue at this initial phase of the first cycle was employers' lack of autism awareness. Within this theme, the consultants described their negative experiences as a result of an employer's absence of understanding, the responsibilisation of the individual to bridge the gap in this understanding and the anxiety caused by this gap. A second area that emerged related to the lived experience of being autistic, in a world where they form a minority group. A third theme arising related to the mystery of the workplace for the consultants. The consultants had many suggestions for addressing this issue, including hearing from autistic graduates and from employers as a way of removing this mystery surrounding the workplace. As a result of the dialogue, a plan for the careers and employability programme for autistic students was co-produced. During this first cycle, this comprised three online workshops on topics determined by the consultants.

At the end of the academic year, KC invited all of the consultants to reflect together on the activities of the cycle and to consider what had been learned. There was positivity about the workshops and delight that tailored careers and employability provision had been offered for autistic students, due to our collaboration. One consultant noted that this was the first time that something she had been involved in had led to a positive change at the university. Another who had recently been diagnosed as autistic, said that working on this project had helped him accept his autism and to see that his differences related to being autistic could be viewed as strengths. Three of the consultants described the sense of belonging they felt as a result of being involved, describing being part of a community of like-minded people across the university with the combined objective of seeking to enhance inclusion.

Reflections on co-creation cycle 1:

JF: Participating in this cycle was really interesting. It gave me an active role, a chance to co-produce with others inside the university and in this way to possibly impact the university community. It created a collective of people right across the institution, doing different courses and at different levels, but with the unified goal of trying to improve inclusion. I found the workshops themselves to be useful, giving me another level of understanding as I started to think about my future. I learned more about the support available and began to think critically about what inclusive organisational cultures could look like. Involvement in the project enabled me to realise that I wanted a career in the future which involved highlighting injustice for neurodivergent people in employment. This particular aspect helped to influence my subsequent PhD research, which is based on this topic of inclusive work environments.

KC: As I came to the end of this first cycle, I was really pleased with what had been achieved. Using a Freirean approach of critical dialogue with the autistic student consultants had not only led to a series of tailored workshops for autistic students but had also resulted in the development of a community where concerns and experiences about employment and the future could be shared. There were even glimpses of transformation, in how the consultants viewed themselves and of a determination to challenge the injustice perceived in the recruitment processes

and workplace and to work to bring about change. As an educator, I felt that I too was beginning to be transformed by the project. Using this collaborative approach meant that I learned a great deal about the lived experience of being autistic and as a result, had more confidence in the careers and employability provision being offered to students. At times, this project had been difficult: systemic challenges in accessing contact details and permission to circulate information to autistic students; fearfulness of change from colleagues outside of the careers service who questioned my intentions in seeking to work with the autistic students; finally, issues with levels of engagement in the workshops from the wider autistic student body. As I reflected on these challenges, I was struck by the determination required by an educator to seek to work in this emancipatory way, when there may be resistance from systems and people to the changes this pedagogy may represent.

Between the cycles

Given the success of collaborating with the autistic students to develop careers and employability provision, KC invited several of the consultants (one of whom was JF) to join an institutional disability employability group that she chaired, which included key members of staff from across the university. KC observed how inviting JF and the other consultant to this group brought fresh enthusiasm and led to the organisation of a careers event for disabled students, to be held during Disability History Month. In addition, the other consultant had a role in the student union which meant that she knew the university's Pro-VC for Student Experience. Through this contact, the Pro-VC agreed to join the institutional disability employability group. His presence led to increased buy-in from other members and access to funding for the activities that followed. As with the workshops, ideas for ensuring the event was inclusive were suggested by the consultants, along with suggestions for marketing and for aspirational speakers.

As a result of the success of the first co-creation cycle, funds were found to create a diversity and inclusion internship within the careers service, which JF successfully secured. During this internship, JF provided feedback and insights on the provision offered by the careers service from a neurodivergent student lens, with a particular focus on the student webpages. KC and JF worked together on the creation of the first careers and employability webpage for disabled students at this institution, which was launched during Disability History Month.

Reflections on Between the cycles:

JF: I think that the activity between the cycles was crucial for launching our presence (both KC's and mine) within the university. The Pro-VC for Student Experience coming on board with the project through his involvement in the wider institutional disability employability group was pivotal and helped to create unique opportunities for KC, the other consultant and I to work together. It was great to get the chance to consult whilst at university, using my lived experience to try to bring about change. All of us involved in the collaboration have our own lived experience, we have all brought our own unique mark and perspective to the project and are on the same level as the practitioners. Co-organising and co-presenting at the Disability History Month event was a great way to champion the inclusion agenda across the university; together we caused a 'ripple effect' across the organisation in relation to neuro-inclusion and disability.

KC: At this point, nine months on from the start of cycle 1, I was delighted by the ongoing activities and the 'ripple effect', as we had started calling the ongoing impact of the work that had begun with our first coming together to engage in critical dialogue months before. I observed what a difference introducing the two consultants had made to the institutional group, in terms of energy, determination and also through introductions to a person who held power within the university. As I (along with these consultants) talked about our collaborative work, I noticed how the term 'co-creation' started to be used by colleagues within and beyond the careers service. Again, there were challenges; the greatest being the time required by these collaborative activities, all of which had to happen on top of my usual job. However, I was particularly pleased to see the consultants being given platforms to share their lived experience and to demonstrate their strengths. I noted how JF and two of the other consultants developed confidence, an assuredness that their voices had real value and a focus on making a difference. By this point, I was struck by how collaborating with the consultants was liberating me: this work was helping me to feel empowered, that I could make a difference and find ways to go beyond the boundaries of my role to provide ways to support disabled students.

Co-creation cycle 2

At the start of the next academic year, KC invited the consultants to reflect on the last cycle of co-creation and to use this to plan activities for the second cycle. Two of the consultants had graduated, but the remaining four were happy to continue to collaborate. Together, we considered that whilst the workshops had been well received, only about 10% of students who had informed the university that they were autistic had engaged with these. It was decided that this cycle would involve a 'multi-pronged' approach, still incorporating tailored workshops, but also developing specific online information for autistic students and offering inclusive one-to-one careers guidance appointments. The development of the inclusive career guidance appointments comprised KC providing disability and autism awareness training to careers colleagues, in addition to bringing about some of the alterations suggested by the student consultants.

Towards the end of the academic year, KC again secured funding to hire 'co-creation' disabled and neurodivergent interns. One of these interns was JF; during the internship he, two other autistic interns and KC spent time developing the careers and employability webpage for autistic students. The result of this is, to our knowledge, the most developed online resource for autistic university students. KC also arranged for JF and one of the other interns to deliver staff training to colleagues at a careers team meeting. Careers colleagues were later to share with KC that this was one of the most useful sessions they had received in a while.

During this cycle, we (JF and KC, and one other consultant) had the opportunity to speak at one internal and three external conferences about the co-creation project. Here we saw real interest in the work we were doing, with many people contacting us afterwards to ask for more information and advice on how to set up something similar at their own institutions. In this way, we saw the 'ripple effect' of the co-creation work growing.

Reflections on co-creation cycle 2:

JF: I particularly valued the opportunity to speak at conferences, to share what we have done and my recommendations for how things should be improved. On the project itself, I have enjoyed having the autonomy to work on the areas of the careers provision that I felt needed improving, in terms of enhancing accessibility. I think it's important to have freedom, to focus on the areas that you, as an expert by experience, consider to be the priorities. During the internship, regular meetings with KC were helpful and kept us on track through mixed methods of in-person and online meetings. I was able to work fully from home and this benefited me due to balancing my studies and the internship. KC supported each of us, tailoring aspects to our needs, enabling a collaborative and pragmatic approach which I do not think had been undertaken before at the university. The power imbalance was addressed through the interns deciding on the priorities for the project.

We have worked hard and have created some valuable resources which will help the careers team as it moves forward in its aims for inclusivity. Feedback from myself, and others I encountered whilst at the conferences, is that the careers service should continue to co-create with students, through paid internships. These paid internships communicate that the student is valued and are a way to remove some of the disproportion of power that exists between staff and students.

I have observed how this co-creation project and associated events and activities have led to real cultural change in the institution. There is now a raised awareness of neuro-inclusion, the role students can play and evidence of enhanced social cohesion as different teams within the university work more closely together. I have also had a chance to develop and learn a great deal – not just about the project and networking, but also about grasping what work can be like. Furthermore, this project opened substantial doors for me as through meeting the Pro-VC Student Experience, I learned about, successfully applied for, and was awarded the VC Bicentennial PhD Scholarship. My thesis is entitled: 'Modern Policing in the 21st century: time for inclusive cultural shift' and is looking at how neurodiversity can be promoted within law enforcement environments. Since embarking on my research, I have forged partnerships with some of the leading law enforcement agencies worldwide and this has enabled me to deliver neuro-inclusion training to government and law enforcement agencies in the UK, Europe, Canada and the US. These partnerships have led to invitations to sit on national committees including the National Police Chiefs Council Neurodiversity Working Group and Culture, Diversity and Inclusion peer support network of strategic EDI leads across the UK.

KC: Although we must be cautious about how much we claim that the work we have done has been truly emancipatory, there have definitely been glimpses, such as what JF has gone on to achieve since! For me, the collaborative work has developed me into a true autism ally. Whereas in the past I had sympathy and aspirations to do something to ensure my practice was inclusive, through listening to and working with autistic students, I now have a deeper respect, a clearer understanding and a stronger desire to ensure their voices are heard and that barriers are challenged.

I have heard some of the consultants articulate the effects of the project, but one of my favourites has to be JF's comment at one of the conferences we spoke at together. When describing the impact the collaborative work has had at the university, he said: 'It's not a ripple, it's more like a tidal wave!'

In the time that has passed since the end of Cycle 2, the co-creation model has been adopted to develop inclusive careers provision for students from the LGBTQ+ community, care experienced students and black students and has been included in the institution's access and participation plan, as a way in which the university is working to eliminate gaps in progression to employment for these groups. In recognition of the work achieved, the careers service recently received an EDI award for work completed with and for under-represented groups. What started as just me, one careers practitioner seeking to develop critical dialogue with a group of autistic students, has grown into something which has had a transformative effect on those involved, our institution and even beyond.

Discussion: what did we achieve?

Aligned with the Freirean philosophy, Hooley et al. (2021)'s *Five signposts to a socially just career guidance* presents as a valuable tool to consider what has been achieved through this study. Hooley et al. (2021)'s five signposts are as follows: **building critical consciousness; naming oppression; questioning what is normal; encouraging people to work together;** and **working at a range of levels.** Our achievements will be considered against each of these in turn.

Firstly, '**building critical consciousness**' refers to the development of a critical awareness: Freire's '*conscientização*' described earlier in this article. To some extent, this was begun by bringing together the autistic student consultants to discuss what could be done to develop tailored careers provision and why this might be important as a method for supporting the wider autistic student community with the challenges they may face. Part of this involved a realisation of autism as 'difference' rather than 'deficit' (as autism has sometimes been viewed in society in the past) and an acceptance of this difference in themselves, through seeing strengths and similarities in their fellow consultants. In this, the consultants' perspectives of themselves were being changed, providing a glimpse of the transformation Freire asserts must occur: 'The weakness of the powerless must be transformed into a force capable of announcing justice' (Freire, 2021, p. 26)

The second signpost, '**naming oppression**', posits that career guidance can aid in the recognition of injustice for those who experience it and support people in coming together in solidarity. Through our co-creation work, we saw glimpses of this naming of oppression, when the consultants first engaged in critical dialogue, which resulted in several sharing their negative experiences of the workplace and fears for the future. This inevitably led to discussions relating to the third signpost, '**questioning what is normal**', where there was a recognition that those holding the power and possessing the opportunities in employment may be utilising recruitment methods that suited themselves, or the neurotypical majority of candidates, rather than the autistic candidates who may require alternative ways to demonstrate the strengths they can bring to the workplace. Another way in which the co-creation project questioned 'normal' approaches was with the careers and employability support provided by the service. Working collaboratively with the consultants to consider

the needs of autistic students highlighted many areas where the provision was not as inclusive as it could be; this included the language used, how careers information guidance was available for students and with some of the events offered. With this signpost, the project went beyond questioning what was normal to identifying these areas and then acting to bring about positive change, to enhance the accessibility of the service. In this way, our work echoed Freire's description of co-creation:

Teachers and students ... co-intent on reality, are both Subjects—not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators.

(Freire, 2000, p. 49)

The co-creation project clearly meets the goal of the fourth signpost, '**encouraging people to work together**'. The achievements of the project could not have been realised without the social interaction, critical dialogue and collaborative work of the group; however, this aspect was not without its challenges. For the consultants, there was the element of juggling involvement with their studies and other commitments; for KC, there were challenges in finding ways to ensure that there was effective dialogue, given the different preferences for communication. An additional, important issue that KC wrestled with as the member of staff in the institution where all other members of the group were students, was the potential issue of a power imbalance, and how to attain the type of working together that Freire envisioned: one that is a 'horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is a logical consequence' (Freire, 2000, p. 91). Whilst steps were made to demonstrate dignity and value to all collaborators, it is difficult to ascertain whether this power imbalance can ever be fully removed.

The fifth and final of Hooley et al. (2021)'s signposts is '**working at a range of levels**'. As the authors note, there is likely to be more of an emancipatory effect if consideration is given to the existing structures that we work in and what can be done to go beyond the bounds of our immediate practice. As described using 'the ripple effect' term, this co-creation project did indeed work at a range of levels, having an impact at an individual level (for the collaborators involved), a local level (the careers service and the resulting enhanced provision), an institutional level (through colleagues adopting the co-creation model and the use of this approach in the university's access and participation plan) and even at a national level (through dissemination at conferences and sharing of practice with colleagues from other institutions).

What is perhaps not fully captured by using Hooley et al. (2021)'s *Five Signposts* as a tool for assessing what has been achieved by taking a Freirean approach to developing provision with autistic students, is the transformative impact *on those involved*. The positive, perhaps even emancipatory, effects on some of the consultants and the careers practitioner has been a delight to observe and experience. This echoes the Freire's promises of transformation: 'The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is themselves taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow' (Freire, 2000, p. 80).

Whilst we have highlighted many benefits of adopting a Freirean approach, it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge some limitations. First, in our context setting at the

beginning of this article, we could be criticised for presenting a polarising perspective, of neoliberalism versus liberation, with careers education using a Freirean approach presented as an emancipatory solution. Of Watts (1996)'s four socio-political ideologies in guidance, our approach would fit the 'radical' ideology, where careers guidance is used to bring about social reform. Watts (1996, pp. 227-228) observes that in practice, 'the extent to which it is feasible and/or legitimate for guidance to adopt a fully fledged social change approach is open to question'. We must be cautious about how much we claim to have achieved, and indeed, the extent to which social reform can be realised through this approach.

Secondly, we appreciate that we must also be careful about the degree to which we can claim that this approach was emancipatory. Whilst there were indeed glimpses of empowerment and transformation for those involved, and the careers provision at this institution has become more inclusive, barriers will still remain for autistic students seeking to transition to employment. In particular, whilst the students involved were made more aware of the challenges, the study did not have capacity to bring about change in the workplace, where many obstacles lie. Thirdly, we acknowledge that the approach described in this article requires resources, both in terms of time and money, for example to pay collaborators for their time and expertise. We are aware that many practitioners would not have the luxury of these resources and may be questioning how they could implement any suggestions made. This is an understandable challenge; for these practitioners, we would suggest that the most important aspect of the approach is the way that individuals are seen and treated. In all careers interventions, the practitioner can view the student/client as someone bringing expertise and can decide to communicate value to them. Practitioners can choose to amplify the voices of those they seek to support (see recommendations below) and in doing so can discover ways to empower them.

Conclusion and recommendations for practitioners

Despite the limitations outlined above, for those considering adopting a similar approach in their own institutions, the authors of this article strongly recommend it. Our own experiences have shown us how rewarding it can be to work collaboratively to create inclusive careers provision. There can be challenges in seeking to bring about change in educational institutions, and you may well encounter resistance, but working together to realise greater levels of inclusion and acceptance has the potential to bring many benefits. In his foreword to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Shaul (2000) avers, 'Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world'. Those of us who work as practitioners therefore have a choice: to contribute to the status quo, or to do what we can, with those who will join us, to use our practice to make a difference. We hope that this account of our transformative work acts as a model for other careers practitioners to adopt, as they seek to use their work to raise critical consciousness and enhance inclusion, for the benefit of the disadvantaged and perhaps even for all.

For those careers practitioners who are interested in collaborating with autistic individuals (or indeed, other marginalised groups) in their settings, a series of principles for practice are suggested below.

Appreciate the needs and strengths of the collaborators

A key element of this type of collaborative work is to understand the individual needs and abilities of those whom you are seeking to involve in dialogue and co-creation. Prior understanding of the marginalised group you will be working with will aid in this; however, the most important approach is to ask the collaborators how they wish to communicate, where they wish to meet, how they would like to contribute, etc. Using this understanding, a practitioner can seek to ensure that all activities are accessible and inclusive, in addition to looking for ways for individuals to use and develop their strengths. For example, when working with autistic individuals, this principle would entail understanding the need for clarity in language and tasks, in addition to asking about preferred working styles and settings.

Facilitate engagement

For many individuals, this will be the first time that they have been invited to participate in this manner and so it is to be expected that they will need support to fully engage in the collaboration, particularly at the beginning. For example, in the study described in this article, some consultants were initially daunted when asked open questions about what the careers and employability programme for autistic students should comprise. Creating structure for the interactions (and sharing this beforehand, so consultants knew what to expect) and providing reassurance and positive feedback were key. In addition, the practitioner sought to demonstrate Freire (2000, p. 80)'s 'teacher-student with student-teachers' approach by truly listening to and responding to the autistic consultants' sharing of perspectives and suggestions; this led to increased confidence and involvement from these individuals over time.

Address the power imbalance

Whilst the ideal is that all participating in this collaborative work are fully equal, in reality, this may be impossible to achieve. Given that the practitioner is likely to be a paid employee and the other members are likely to be service users (whether this as students in a school or university, or clients in an adult community setting), there will be a power imbalance that could prevent effective collaboration.

The practitioner should seek to remove this imbalance as much as they are able, by seeking to approach the collaborative project with no set agenda. Instead, the collaboration should begin with questions asked of all participants (including, but not beginning with the practitioner): what do they see as the priorities? What are the existing challenges? Where could the opportunities lie?

Following this, members should jointly decide on next steps. It should be noted that this approach can initially be uncomfortable for all involved. In the study described in this article, there were times at the beginning where the consultants appeared unnerved by being given so much control, and the practitioner found the experience of 'letting go' of a pre-determined plan a little nerve-wracking! However, this discomfort was short-lived; once

all developed experience and understood the freedom of their new roles as partners, there was general enthusiasm for the new approach and the freedom this brought.

Amplify their voices

Given that the individuals you seek to collaborate with in this participatory way may come from underrepresented backgrounds or are marginalised in society, it is particularly important that you find ways to ensure their voices are heard. This not only provides opportunities for empowerment of these individuals but can also educate others; recipients could include practitioners, senior management or policy makers. In this way, collaborative work can begin to have impact beyond the immediate project, to highlight wider issues such as where oppression exists and what should be done to resolve this. Examples of amplification of the autistic consultants' voices within this study included inviting them to contribute to the training on a staff away day and to co-present at local and national conferences.

If you would like to find out more, please contact the authors, or look at the other published articles about this project:

- Coney, K. (2023). Autistic students as partners in the design of tailored employability provision. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 14(2), 16-32. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2023vol14no2art1793>
- Coney, K. (2021). What should be done to ensure that autistic graduates success in the workplace? *Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further and Higher Education*, 106-124. <https://nadp-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/JIPFHE-Issue-13.1-Summer-2021-pdf.pdf>



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