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**Re-thinking employability with a literacies lens: from skills to practices, from tool-kits to ethnography**

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**Abstract**

This paper draws on the outcomes of an Higher Education Academy funded project, Literacies for Employability (L4E) to contribute to discussion of the interface between university learning and workplace settings and the focus on employability that dominates the English context. The paper will be of interest to colleagues from any discipline who have an interest in critical (re)readings of employability and practical ways of engaging student in ethnographic approaches to understanding workplace practices, particularly those with an interest in professional, work-based, or placement learning.

L4E is grounded in social theories of communication from Sociology and Education that understands literacy as a complex social activity embedded in *domains* of practice. These ideas recognise workplaces as domains that are highly distinctive and diverse contexts for literacy (rather than generic or standard) and that to be successful in particular workplace settings students must be attuned to, and adaptive and fluent in, the nuanced literacy practices of that workplace. However evidence suggests (Lea and Stierer, 2000) that HE students (and teachers) rarely experience overt teaching about literacy in general or workplace literacies in particular. This project developed a framework to scaffold and support this process across the disciplines so that students can develop the attitudes and behaviours they will need to be successful in the workplace. The approach chimes with recommendations from Pegg et al (2012) that employability is most effectively developed through a focus on more expansive, reflexive approaches to learning and through “raising confidence…self-esteem and aspirations’ (2012:9).

(Word Count 245)

**Key Words: Employability, Critical Employability, Literacies, New Literacy Studies, Higher Education, Vocational learning**

**Introduction**

Over the last three decades participation in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) has increased substantially from 12% in 1979 to 48% in 2015 (DfE, 2016). Such large scale ‘massification’ (Scott, 2000) in combination with the impact of globalisation and more recently recession, has put UK universities under increasing pressure from policymakers to engage more actively and explicitly with an ‘employability’ agenda, that is to say to align the outcomes of higher education more closely to the perceived needs of employers and the economy. Universities are increasingly responding with ‘skills-based’, employer-led curricula that play out a discourse of ‘graduate-ness’ as ‘enhanced work-readiness’ (Boden and Nedeva, 2010:49-50). In this paper we draw on the outcomes of a UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) Teaching Development Grant (TDG) funded project, *Literacies for Employability* (L4E), to argue that in practice such an approach often has the paradoxical effect of restricting, rather than expanding, students’ concept-making about the world of work. An over emphasis, we argue, on narrow, functional models of being and doing in work diminish potential for creative agency and the re-imagining of workplace relations.

The L4E project sought to work with alternative perspectives on employability, ‘plugging in’ ideas from the New Literacy Studies to offer new starting points for employability curricula. Evidence suggests (Lea and Stierer, 2000) that HE students (and teachers) rarely experience overt teaching about literacy in general or workplace literacies in particular and the project aimed to develop a framework to scaffold and support these processes. The L4E project, which is non-discipline specific, builds on Pardoe and Ivanic’s (2007) work on Literacies for Learning in FE. The framework tool, developed through the project, affords, we suggest, an alternative, disruptive lens through which students might understand workplaces as distinctive, complex social domains mediated by a wide variety of literacy events and practices that are, in turn, patterned and framed by institutions and power relationships, which are historically situated and constantly evolving (Barton and Hamilton, 1998:7). This approach, we contend, re-imagines employability as a process of on-going, restless enquiry rather than one of acquisition of a specified skills set. In this way, we argue, our approach facilitates, opportunities to open up, explore, investigate, interpret and analyse workplace settings, and ones own entanglement with them. After Gee’s (2000) Bill of Rights for literacy learners our work with student co-researchers suggests that such an approach enables development of meta-understandings of the workplace and recognition of the ways of being and doing (identities, subjectivities, allegiances, affiliations, attitudes, behaviours, structural relations) that pattern and frame workplace interactions. Consequently student researchers felt better able to understand their own positionality within those relations and make decisions, based on thoughtful, self-conscious assessments of risk, about their own participation as neophyte professionals, volunteers and workers. Such an approach directly addresses OECD (2015) concerns that higher education programmes teach “yesterday’s skills to tomorrow’s graduates” so that “even highly qualified candidates have the wrong skills for the jobs available” and chimes with the recommendations of Pegg et al (2012) that employability is most effectively developed through a focus on more expansive, reflexive approaches to learning and through “raising confidence…self-esteem and aspirations” (2012:9).

**Higher education and neoliberalism: ‘employability’ and conditions of possibility**

As outlined above, we argue that the reconceptualisation of the higher education curriculum as a space for building workplace skills, identities and subjectivities is a manifestation of a broader political turn informed by the tenets of neo-liberalism: the self-interested individual; free market economics; commitment to laissez faire regulation of markets; and commitment to free trade (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Within this paradigm, argue Olssen and Peters (2005) the role of the state is to create “the conditions, laws and institutions” (2005:214), the conditions of possibility, for ‘the market’ to persist in the terms outlined above. As such higher education (and indeed education more generally), as a state funded technology of marketisation, becomes a locale for the creation of “enterprising and competitive entrepreneur[s]” (Olssen and Peters, 2005: 315). In this next section we notice the trace of neoliberal discourse played out through higher education UK policy around employability over the last four decades.

The Robbins Report in 1963 was keen to stress that HE should not just be viewed as a tool to serve economic needs. Instead, Robbins argued, a balanced perspective needed to recognise that HE also helped create the cultured and civilised society in which the economy operates. In the 1970s this balanced approach remained prevalent, although arguments were building for improved relations between education and businesses. James Callaghan noted his concern in his speech at Ruskin College that many good students preferred the academic life or the civil service to joining the business world. He also highlighted complaints from employers that new recruits often did not have the basic skills needed to do the job required (Callaghan, 1976). As the 1980s proceeded, linking education with business began to take greater prominence to the extent that Tasker and Packham (1994) declared the values of business were promoted alongside educational ones. The 1987 Paper[[1]](#footnote-1) (DES), *Higher education: meeting the challenge,* positioned economic requirements as the ‘urgent need’ (1987:1) HE had to address. Furthermore, this paper placed these requirements as essential to the planning framework of HE so that the economy would be served more effectively arguing for example for HE provision to be shifted towards subjects for which ‘future employer demand is strongest’ (1987:10). By 1991 a new White Paper *Higher education: a new framework* (DES), made no mention at all of a cultural or social function for HE. The emphasis lay instead on a need to be responsive to business and commerce and to justify the general economic and commercial relevance of HE provision. Jones and Thomas (2005: 618) describe this new emphasis as a utilitarian turn, in which the primary focus is on the relationship between HE and the economy and ensuring the former becomes ‘increasingly receptive to developments in the latter’. The new purpose of HE, Jones and Thomas argue, is reduced simply to meeting economic needs, a role that neglects any potential for social, cultural or civic benefit and commodifies the processes and practices of knowledge production.

This utilitarian focus gathered momentum from the 1990s into the millennium with the HE sector increasingly under pressure to increase ‘its contribution to the economy and its responsiveness to the needs of business’ (DfEE, 1998: 3; DfES 2003). In 2008 Thorpe extended Tasker and Packham’s (1994) view that business values are promoted as much as educational ones to argue that any value frameworks within HE that do not relate to economic values have been delegitimised. Specifically, Thorpe argues, the role of HE is re-calibrated at this time with vocational purposefulness gaining traction over notions of ‘intrinsic good’. In 2010 the Browne Report builds on this position asserting that the HE system continues to be insufficiently responsive to the skills required by the economy. A key focus of Browne’s recommendations then related to ensuring a ‘closer fit between what is taught in higher education and the skills needed in the economy’ (201:23). A subsequent white paper *Higher education: students at the heart of the system* (BIS, 2011) confirmed employment outcomes as essential criteria for judging the quality of a course and attracting prospective students. The paper required each institution to produce a Key Information Set (KIS) for each course for potential applicants to view. Employment and earning outcomes feature predominantly in this KIS. This approach is in line with the paper’s overall aim to attract more people into HE to ‘greater the national economic gain’ (p.8). Accordingly, the paper’s proposals stressed the government’s intentions to make universities ’become even more responsive to the changing demands of students and employers for high level skills and employability’ (BIS, 2011: 3). High value is attributed to the vocational application of higher education in this paper, the opening reference to ‘Higher education [as]…a good thing” or that “Students may study a subject because they love it regardless of what it means for their earnings” (2011:38), simply serving as an opener to a section on ‘Employer engagement’ and ‘rewarding careers’(2011:38). Certainly the UK government has for some time been keen to assert a perceived correlation between an individual’s literacy level and the kinds of income they might expect to command (Pember, 2001).

A utilitarian focus for teaching employability in higher education is apparent in both the Browne Report (2010) and the 2011 White Paper (BIS), which emphasised employment skills as the main aim that courses should achieve. The utilitarianism of HE is further promoted in the 2011 White Paper (BIS) through employers being encouraged to kite mark and endorse degrees. As further evidence of the growing importance attached to graduate employability, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) began to develop metrics in 2001 (HEFCE 2001, 2002, 2003) to understand for university performance which include indicators of graduate labour market outcomes culminating in the use of such data to ‘grade’ universities through the Teaching Excellence Framework Exercise (French and O’Leary, 2017).

As the historical outline above illustrates university education has been increasingly linked with, and some have argued, reduced to, a utility that coheres around the idea that participation in higher education will deliver better employment opportunities and higher wages for individual graduates (Ball, 2008). Indeed the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) measures graduate labour market outcomes as one of its performance indicators (HEFCE, passim) and tuition fees have been justified on the grounds due to the ‘graduate premium’, graduates can expect to earn a lot more than non–graduates, although the differentials are decreasing year on year (ONS, 2011). Not surprisingly, universities have for some time incorporated employability features into their ‘graduate characteristics’ such as the ability to ‘self-manage careers’ and a commitment to ‘continue learning throughout their working lives’ (Harvey and Morey, 2003).

**Conceptualising Employability – Big D discourses**

In this section we explore what (Gee, 2011) refers to as ‘big D’ Discourses about employability, “that is to say the combination of language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing and valuing and using various symbols, tools and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (2011:201) in this case two competing accounts of ‘employability’. Later on in the article we will set these discourses alongside the world-figuring, or ‘little d’ discourses, (Gee 2011) undertaken at the individual level.

The first account traces neo-liberal discourse outlined above as played out at the institutional locus, the second draws on thinking from literacy studies to imagine a new pedagogical paradigm for students exploration of employability.

***‘Employability’ in the neo-liberal turn***

In terms of delivering an institutional response to this employer/employment-led agenda universities have often tried to raise the visibility of employability as an extra facet of undergraduate entitlement. Most commonly this has involved overtly embedding skills based, employment-related activities into existing courses, creating new stand-alone employment focused courses (sometimes accredited) or strands to degree programmes and increasing opportunities for work experience. This produces a clear employer-led agenda that has shaped policy and pedagogic discourses around graduate employability. In combination these approaches have a tendency to treat graduateness as a form of enhanced ‘work-readiness’ (Boden and Nedeva, 2010: 49-50) engendering an ‘entrepreneurial habitus’ that socialises students to become compliant workers (Tarrent, 2001).

In common with the widening participation agenda in higher education, enhanced employability skills for graduates have been consistently presented as a commodified resource that successive governments have been prepared to invest in so that they can compete and trade more effectively in global economic and employment markets (Ball, 2008; Sanguinnetti 2000 and Gee 2000). In this way employability initiatives and strategies concur with a very individuated model of learning in higher education. Gee (2000: 46) discusses how in what he calls the New Capitalism, skills can be neatly compartmentalised and are universally applicable. Individuals in this model are constituted in the labour market as skills ‘repositories’ ready to advertise and display what they have to offer any potential employer. As such individual agency is subjugated to ensembles of “skills stored in a person, assembled for a specific project, to be reassembled for other projects, and shared…” (2000: 46)

In a Foucauldian sense, we argue conversely that the skills-focused discourses that inform many employability programmes can end up limiting individuals’ engagement with the world of work as their emphasis is often on a very narrow and functional model of employability skills which ‘… structure the possible field of action’ (Foucault, 1982:221, in Dreyfus et al, 1983) in which those skills can be deployed. In comparison, the ‘real life’ arena for employability literacies is fluid, complicated and always already in flux. It is therefore difficult to envisage how a single universal skill set could ever cover all the different aspects of employment that might be required by graduates. For this reason we maintain that a predominately skills focused discourse has served to limit students, lecturers and employers’ conceptions of employability in particular kinds of ways.

Fig. 1 Contrasting employability paradigms

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| --- | --- |
| **Dominant*****Skills- focussed conceptualisation of employability skills***  | **L4E alternative*****Critical re-conceptualisation employability literacies***  |
| Autonomous  | Ideological  |
| Objective | Subjective  |
| Technicist skills set * Reading as transmission, decoding
* Writing as transmission, encoding
 | Social practice * Reading as meaning making – self and world
* Writing as making – self and world
 |
| Universal  | Situated |
| Functional  | Creative  |
| Performative  | Developmental  |
| Fixed  | Fluid |
| A-historical | Historically situated |
| Naturalistic, Humanist subject | Ontological subject |
| Neoliberal driver | Social justice impulse |
| Critical incidents | Hot Spots |

Fig. 2 Paradigm driven ways of ‘doing’ and ‘knowing’

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Dominant**  | **L4E**  |
| Linear  | Rhizomic |
| Quality led  | Experiential  |
| Product focussed | Process based  |
| Norm referenced  | Relative  |
| Individual | Social  |
| Generic | Context-bound  |
| Individual  | Collaborative  |
| External | Embedded |
| Deficit/repair model  | Holistic/open-ended |
| Acquisitional | Embedded |
| Reflective | Reflexive |

As figure 1 illustrates a dominant skills focussed model (or paradigm) characterises employability as a tangible, known and knowable, fixed set of skills that can be systematically and mechanically acquired. Consequently, traditional conceptions of employability understand employment ‘competencies’ to belong to de-contextualised ‘tool-kits’ of, ‘key’, ‘core’, ‘transferable’ and/or ‘generic’ skills. Such “key competencies” argues Kascak et al (2011: 84) “have become obligatory resources in planning education at all levels (in…state and school curricula)” serving “to produce high-quality ‘human capital’ for the labour market.”

Specifically, employability skills around communication are underpinned by an autonomous (Street, 1999) model of literacy skills. Within such a model literary social practices such as reading, writing, speaking and listening skills can be unproblematically transferred to the workplace, irrespective of the employment settings graduates might find themselves in.

Such a view reflects an essentially neoliberal concept of human capital where the onus falls on the student, who has a responsibility to become employable and/or attractive to employers, an “entrepreneur of one’s own development” (Gerlach, 2000:189, cited in Kascak et al, 2011:74), in order to compete successfully for the opportunity to work. In a time of recession and high unemployment degrees are increasingly ‘sold’ on the basis that they can enhance participant’s employability, affording competitive edge in the job market, “clearly indicat[ing] the interconnections between” concepts of “the active, self-organized and self-educated individual and economic efficiency” (Kascek et al 2011:74). This reflects a broader shift in education, as discussed above, towards a more commodified, ‘new knowledge economy’ (Ball, 2008) that positions graduate-ness as enhanced human and social capital, primarily paid for, or subsidised by the state and as such, accountable to the state.

However, left unquestioned this reliance on a ‘tool-box’ approach to employability where students are encouraged to acquire a repertoire of such skills, has a tendency to elide social and political differences between individuals, and means that issues of cultural capital and unequal power relations between individuals and groups are often not taken into account, by students or those working with them in pursuit of an employability agenda.

***Re-thinking employability: towards a social practice model***

Higher education academic writing and writing development practices take place within institutions which may be highly pedagogised spaces in disciplinary terms but which often lack a sense of clarity and criticality about what actually constitutes and supports learning generally and academic literacies specifically (Lea and Street, 1998; Ganobscik- Williams, 2006). Biggs (2003) argues that all forms of higher education learning may, for this reason, benefit from a more explicitly ‘metacognitive’ pedagogic approaches that foreground and problematise the processes involved in learning and teaching. Barnett (2000) argues that universities inhabit a ‘super complex’ world in which they are not sole, authoritative producers and reproducers of information or knowledge in particular, fixed forms. Indeed, he argues that in the modern world the nature and status of any knowledge-claims are increasingly debatable and contestable as are the forms deployed to express them. Learning in higher education should, therefore, according to Barnett (2000), be progressively experienced via the negotiation of a number of contested critical metanarratives or frameworks through which information can be expressed and experienced.

The L4E project that we draw on to construct this second narrative takes as its alternative starting point the idea that employability literacies can neither be summed up as a definable skills set nor usefully taught as part of a functional work-based curriculum (Pegg, 2010). In this section we aim to challenge established approaches to student employability by plugging-in to theories and concepts from New Literacy Studies (NLS) theorists, (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1990, 2000, Cope et al, 2002, Street, 1999, 2001, Lankshear and Knobel, 2006) to help us think through student learning about employment, the ‘world of work’ and participation in the workplace. NLS researchers have sought to reconceptualise literacy as a complex social activity embedded in domains of practice. In this approach employability practices, like other social practices, are part “…of a [workplace] domain… framed by its culture. Their meaning and purpose are socially constructed through negotiations among present and past members…[Such] activities thus cohere in a way that is, in theory, if not always in practice, accessible to members who move within the social framework. These coherent, meaningful, and purposeful activities are…most simply defined as the ordinary practices of the culture” (Seely Brown, Collins & Duguid 1989:1).

As figure 1 demonstrates, the shifted emphasis informing the L4E critical employability literacies framework reflects Barnett’s (2000) contention that contestable and fluid pedagogic frameworks are a vital component of ‘super complexity’ in higher education as they seek to create new spaces for students (and lecturers) to question traditional practices, in this case in relation to orthodoxies of employability. *Employability literacies*, such as interviewing, writing application forms and conducting presentations can be usefully viewed as socially situated activities which need to take into account the wider social contexts in which they take place. Situated theories of learning/cognition provide “…conceptual and methodological resources for investigating the fundamental processes of cognition as a social and situated activity” (Kirshner & Whitson, 1997:3). In particular, they trouble traditional concepts of knowledge transfer and knowledge acquisition “by shifting the focus away from the individual as the unit of analysis toward the sociocultural setting in which activities are embedded (Kirshner and Whitson. 1997:5)” and provide new ways of being and doing employability as illustrated in figure 2.

This situated learning/cognition model challenges the traditional, passive ‘knowledge transfer’ model often implicit in university teaching (as discussed above) where there is a reliance on individuated, human capital models of knowledge acquisition which imply little connection between subject-specific learning, context and discourse, see figure 2. One can argue that any situated and social activity, such as being interviewed or writing a letter of application can only become meaningful in an external, social domain rather than through any individuated, internal processes - as Brown, Collins and Duguid contend when knowledge is co-produced through activity “learning and cognition…are fundamentally situated” (1989: 1).

**Mapping a critical employability literacies landscape**

***Overview of the L4E Project***

The L4E project ran over an eighteenth month period from June 2012 to December 2013 and, as outlined above, drew on contemporary ideas from literacy studies to reconceptualise employability as a process of induction into the social practices of the workplace. Focusing on literacies as a mechanism for enabling successful immersion in workplace cultures the project aimed to develop, pilot and embed a cross-curricular ‘literacies- for-employability’ framework that could be flexed across disciplines and workplace contexts. The project sought to achieve specific benefits for tutors and students.

In the case of tutors, to enable them to embed ‘overt instruction’ (after Gee to mean self-conscious ‘teaching about’) of workplace literacies concepts into the design and content of work-based or placement curricula and to engage them in co-investigation and co-construction, with students, of meta-narratives of workplace literacies. In the case of students the project focused on re-conceptualisation of employability as a dynamic, contested concept, which one might continue to engage critically with over a career course. This included ethnographic exploration, analysis and critique of the literacy practices of the workplace, consideration of own positionality within existing work-based practices and opportunities to plan participation self-consciously and explore notions of risk.

The project was undertaken in four phases: development of the L4E framework; piloting of the framework; embedding in to the curriculum at our own university; and recontextualisation in a wider partnership of university settings. In the development phase a literature review was undertaken to provide the theoretical framing for the project and produce the draft framework. The framework, see figure 2, was adapted from Pardoe and Ivanic’s (2007) work on Literacies for Learning in Further Education (LfLinFE). Pardoe and Ivanic’s work was specifically aimed at supporting teachers to make reading and writing in the FE curriculum more varied, more connected to students literacy practices in life and more ‘useful’ and ‘relevant; to the vocational needs of students as they navigated workplace contexts. Drawing on social practice models they identified nine aspects of literacy that teachers might use to analyse reading and writing within a course, unit or activity to support small changes in practice that contribute to more useful learning for students. Whilst Pardoe and Ivanic’s work makes a ground-breaking contribution to re-thinking the literacy practices of curriculum design in vocational education, it is the teacher in the LfLinFE model, rather than the student or, the student and teacher in collaboration, who does the ‘critical thinking’ about literacies. The aim of LfLinFE is to enable teachers to provide curriculum opportunities that are more ‘authentic’, useful and relevant, for vocational students so that they are better equipped to participate in vocational literacies and more attuned to the ‘vocational habitus’ of the world of work. As such workplace relations are reproduced and insinuated in the classroom rather than opened up as a possible object of study. For us there is a paradox here. Whilst the teacher is encouraged to inhabit the right hand critical spaces of figure 1, the student may constrained to a more restricted, left hand space experience, their role diminished to one of recognition and acquisition of required, prescribed identities and actions presented neutrally as ‘realities’ of the workplace, put simply the ‘*way things are done*’ – the neo-liberal competence model, described by Kascak (2011), in action.

We were motivated to put the LfLinFE framework to work in a quite different way, as a lens through which students, teachers, and students and teachers as collaborators, might re-view and interrogate workplace literacies as starting points for thinking through employability. We wanted this lens to be both literal and conceptual, an auto-ethnographic experience of ‘turning one’s critical gaze towards’ the workplace within which one is immersed. The framework, described below, was therefore developed as an ‘app’ for use with mobile devices that could be used *in situ* to ‘capture’ literacy moments, texts, events, practices, interactions and interventions, anything considered to be significant as it occurred in the moment. The app then enables critical interrogation of the chosen tableau through dialogic question prompts that relate back to the nine aspects of a literacy practice, see figure 2. The student is then able to share their thinking through analysis with their teacher and peers via a shared web-space mediated by the teacher. The web-space allows individual, group and collective collation and curation of the empirical material, photographs, descriptions, reflections and commentaries, amassed by the group, yielding a substantial ethnographic ‘data’ archive about a particular type or grouping of workplace settings. This resource can then be used, as we did in the embedding stage of the project, as content for meta-learning about workplaces in a critical employability curriculum.

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| **Picture** | **Purpose of work-based communication** In your example what is the purpose of the communication? What is the nature of your example and what is it trying to achieve? Is it individual? Is it institutional? Is it information gathering? | **Audience (s)for work-based information** In your example, who is saying what & to whom? Service user - Employee Customer – Employee Manager – Employee What are the dynamics of the relationship in your example? How is power exercised through forms of communication in your workplace example? |
| **House/Corporate Styles** Do you wear a uniform as part of your role in your example? How are corporate logos or branding used in your example? Typeface Prompt Use of colour What does your example tell you about business custom and practice in your workplace?  | **Risks, Flexibility and constraints** In terms of your example: Why here? Why now? Why like this? To what extent do communications in this example have to be done like this? Is this the only way this could have been done? Why – who decides? What are the opportunities for doing this differently? What is the risk involved for doing it differently?  | **Workplace Roles**Who has originated your example and in what role does this happen? What values and priorities do they bring to your example? Do your values and priorities comply or contrast with those priorities? |
| **Means and modes of communication**What type of communication is your example illustrating? Is the communication multi-modal: Paper? Digital? Is it to be read in linear or non-linear way? Is the communication face-to-face? Who is the communication by? | **Professional practices** What does your example tell you about professional practices in you workplace? What aspect of professional practice is your example a part of? What is your example trying to achieve? Is there a protective element underlying the professional practice in question?  | **Work-based social relationships**What does your example suggest to you about social relationships in your workplace? Interaction? Collaboration? Power relations? |

Figure 3. Literacies for Employability (L4E) framework.

In the piloting phase of L4E nine funded student researchers undertaking either work placements integral to their programmes or study, or paid work alongside their study made use of the framework to collect empirical material – pictures, reflections and responses to the prompts. The student researchers were recruited by open advert via the Universities employment agency ‘Student Opportunity.’ Applicants were selected based on their enthusiasm for the project, their access to a workplace or placement during the material collection phase and their availability in terms of time commitments. As such researchers were drawn from disciplines across the University’s Schools and Departments including, Post-compulsory Education, Law, Sociology and Early Childhood Studies and were at different stages of their degree study. This mix of disciplines provided a variety of contexts through which to explore the play of literacies in workplace settings and opportunities to compare and contrast practices and encounters.

Researchers were given little guidance on ‘what’ to collect, invited alternatively to capture ‘hot spots’ in their experience of work-place literacy, that is to say moments of recognition, “movement, singularity, emergence” (Maclure, 2013: 171), “gut feelings [that] point to the existence of embodied connections with other people, things and thoughts.” (ibid: 172).

This material was then shared and discussed in a whole research group conversation (student researchers and university researchers) at which the framework was revised and refined. Student researchers were undertaking programmes of study in Law, Further Education teacher training, Sociology and Early Childhood Studies and collected and responded to empirical material generated in a range of contexts including the Citizens Advice Bureau[[2]](#footnote-2), a nursery school, a further education college, a rehabilitation centre for people recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, clothing retail outlets and a nightclub/bar. It is our conversations at this stage of the project that we discuss in the next section of the paper to explore the effects of working with the L4E framework.

**Figured worlds – towards a critical employability curriculum**

In this section we explore the impact of the L4E framework on student researchers’ concept-making, or what Gee (2011) might call ‘little d’ world-figuring about their experiences of the world of work. In this discussion we focus particularly on the methodological, the auto-ethnographic processes of self-conscious ‘noticing differently’ that L4E facilitates, and use of the framework to explore social relationships and evaluate risk, flexibility and constraints in relation to workplace practice.

**Noticing**

Working with the L4E framework seemed to facilitate a heightened sensitivity to aspects of workplace practice that had previously been taken for granted as the ‘common sense’ of work as the students ‘noticed’ their environment differently:

*Yeah it did help me to notice…so for example with the marking I think it made me notice the formal side of it…so it might be informal in terms of the way you communicate but then you’ve got the formal paperwork that you’ve got to fill in…*

*Very good at drawing your attention to things…*

*So there were certain things that I may be didn’t look at initially that I went back and used the grid I thought “oh yeah that fits in nicely there”*

This enabled students to understand their situatedness – to see themselves as ‘expert witnesses’ or ‘subjective participants’ always, already immersed in and entangled with the day to day social practices of their work-based environments, “you’ve got the knowledge…the grid helps you apply it and…then you can evaluate it,” that are in turn intricately linked to wider life-world experience:

*Or it might identify certain relationships, especially for example with Facebook or the Twitter which you’d automatically think [it’s only for] ‘students’ but actually , it’s open to the public, the public can see those…you realise there’s a difference to the working relationships that you can have based on the different forms of communication.*

Using and discussing the grid stimulated new opportunities for forging connections between aspects of experience that had previously been considered distinctive and unrelated, for example work-based/public and non work-based/private such as Facebook, allowing openings for new meaning-making about and interpretations of everyday practice:

*I think it’s helpful to see how they link together…the grid is very good at making it obvious if you like, how the constraints and how the logo or the identity work together…how one piece of communication is common to a whole lot of things in the grid. For example, at the nursery rules grid is showing how it can communicate…the child’s identity as they belong to that nursery…or it can communicate the constraints…the grid is very good at showing how one piece of text or conversation has a whole lot of different categories to fall in to…*

Noticing differently prompted re-evaluation, a reflexive ‘picking away’ at the everyday-ness of long-held certainties as students moved around the grid applying the question prompts destabilising, un-fixing and un-doing (the being and doing modes of L4E outlined in figure 2) long held reference points as they grappled to engage with each dimension of the framework:

*Diff lit used in a nursery I think that by using the grid it became very obvious first of all that there’s kind of two separate erm types of lit used, I think the types of communication used between adults and between adults to children are very different and that’s in the style and the type of language used, it’s obviously a lot simpler for children but also you haven’t got as much of it but also the way you’re expected to communicate for example it’s much more multi-modal with children in the nursery there are a lot of ways that the multimodal stuff is more positioned towards the children…whereas the staff would use more technology, they’d be on the phone or they’d be on the email …whereas the children would be given role play areas to encourage interaction or given art and gluing and things to paly with to get them learning how to communicate. I think it’s more centred around getting the children to learn how to communicate rather than sharing any actual information with them. I think in grid area 5, if you look at resources there are a whole load of things that do go in to other areas of the grid as well…teaching children how to read or write rather than teaching information about that.*

The question prompts were appreciated as generative, dialogic openings, ways ‘in’ to thinking a bit differently, “the thing about the grid” remarked one student is that it “[draws your attention to] all those things that they don’t tell you about the job, that they don’t teach you, it allows you to identify all those things that are going on in the job.” Users became researchers, auto-ethnographers of the work-places setting describing, re-presenting and playing with social and structural relations and reflecting on their own positionality and choices and the affordances and constraints that framed these;

*You’ve got the knowledge…the grid helps you apply it and…then you can evaluate it*

For some this served to de-festishise the notion of employment readiness and instead to interrogate their own motivation with regard participation in a particular set of social practices, ‘reading themselves’ against Big D discourses of work.

*clients are willing to wait for three hours purely because it’s free…with increasing costs for solicitors and lawyers…clients are willing to give up a whole day…and we’re shouldered with that burden as in we’ve really got to rise to expectation….with this like I’m doing a law degree and I really do want to practice….but this placement has really made me think what kind… do I really want to become that?...what kind? Do I really want to become a lawyer? I think its really good, I didn’t really think about…the grid was fine and as soon as I started to talk about it to the staff…I thought is it something that I really want?*

For this student in particular this meant taking responsibility for her own decision-making asking herself what did it mean to her to be a lawyer *in practice*, what sorts of roles and identities did it require her to enact and how did these collide with her existing values, politics and preferred social identities.

***Risks, Flexibility and constraints***

Student researchers were quick to recognise the potential for sensitivities around the sort of reflexive analysis they were engaged in and how their insights might position them in relation to dominant rhetoric of the workplace. This led to discussion of the constraints of workplace practice and consideration of individual positionality in relation to these;

*I think if you were going to use it as something to learn about the literacies in workplaces it might be something to use for yourself rather than comment on all the time…I think in a nursery if we went in and said how flexible are we they would say “oh we’re very flexible and we adhere to the child's needs and we do this and we do that” and if you were using the grid you might say “well you don’t do this and you don’t do that” and these are your constraints because I think they don’t necessarily want that spoken about….*

Identifying boundaries and the risks associated with boundary crossing mobilised potential for agentic decision-making that re-interpreted rather than reproduced pervasive practice and identities and opened up new possibilities for alternative ways of doing and being as a worker, “Learning where you can be flexible and what your constraints are – where there is leeway to make decisions”. Rules came to be understood as framing, rather than defining, capacity for agency, with ideas about responsibility, purpose, morality and ethics mobilised to mediate reactions, responses and decision-making:

*In reality we’re told is that an interview with a client it is meant to be 15 minute, it doesn’t happen, some take up to an hour because a client might be upset, they might need to pop out or want to tell you more about the situation, rules are there for a purpose and it’s great but sometimes in practice they don’t work. That’s what it’s really highlighted for me that I’ve really picked up that there are rules but you’ve got to be flexible to reach a purpose or fulfil an aim*

Equally students used the grid to explore the entangled nature of life and work domains, in the extract below for example the relationship between life-world and work-world identities, priorities and concerns is scrutinised as the student begins to wonder what it means to make choices about forms and mediums of communication and in turn (and perhaps more importantly) whose interests are best served by decisions taken: -

*We were told by member of staff training us that if a client speaks a certain language and you speak it, for example I speak Punjabi, it’s up to you whether you want to speak it or not but if you do the client might get used to you and ask for you again and if you don’t they might not want to talk to you. If a client comes in and I can see that they would really benefit from speaking Punjabi then I’ll do it. There was an example of someone who I referred to a debt counsellor and the debt counsellor was Indian too but refused to speak Punjabi, we were shocked, the clients come to you for help and you’ve got the power to speak Punjabi but you’re not going to speak it…*

This concern with how power is exercised in the work-place, a sense that “you won’t ever get the ‘ideal client’” but instead need to engage creatively, flexibly but crucially, critically, with the unpredictability of the circumstances within which you find yourself – “building relationships and interacting is part of our job” - prompted interesting reflections on work-based roles and social relationships.

***Work-based roles and social relationships***

Whilst the idea that “You’ve got to make people feel comfortable” influenced concept making this was equally likely to be coupled with recognition that comfort and discomfort were not entirely stable opposites,

*Social interaction is really important and building relationships over time…making decisions and taking risks – giving children a hug, [although the rules caution against this] ‘mum’ would want us to pick them up and give them a hug*

In this extract for example the tension between serving corporate guidelines and parents and children as differently positioned clients within a practice is managed through a reckoning and balancing of interpersonal relationships and action in context and decision-making is contingent, dynamic and dialogic (see figure 2). This resonates with Stronach et al’s (2002) descriptions of ‘jockying stories’ as student Nurses and Teachers ‘juggle’ and ‘toggle’ selves and practices in their attempts to navigate the big D discourses of learning world of work Teaching and Nursing.

Students also recognised the risk inherent in decision making, not only for themselves but also for more senior or experienced colleagues, as individual commitments came in to collision with with corporate values and priorities. Describing her work in retail this student researcher reflected on the precarity of the employee experience, “*Even the managers… if a shop gets a new concept it’s the managers fighting for their own jobs….they’re fighting for their jobs as much as we are”,* noticing the instability and fragility of lived experience within the context of world of work settings not only for herself but for more senior colleagues who otherwise appeared to exercise power or control. These reflections often took student researchers into conversations about Big D discourses about how the meanings of human labour played out within different settings prompting them to be thoughtful about the ways in which their relationships with risk (which were always informed by financial, social, cultural capitals) allowed them to be more or less complicit or antagonistic in particular contexts.

**Towards Concluding**

*…the ofsted logo…it’s like a badge to say… recognise how things change over time and how workplaces change for example post ofsted when the branding of the outstanding logo is being related to ‘career progression’*

As the world-figuring explored above demonstrates, L4E re-imagines employability as a process of enquiry rather than acquisition of skills, an opportunity to explore, investigate, interpret and analyse workplace settings, and ones own entanglement with them. Re-viewing the workplace through the embodied act of holding the lens to capture ‘a something’ – moment, incident, artefact, interaction - that interests, engages or affects, the ‘hot-spot’ mentioned above, mobilises a very different approach to concept-making about employability. Not simply ‘how can I fit in to this workplace’, but a whole series of key questions about workplace dynamics;

How does it work?

Who does it work for?

What does it mean to play with and against the rules?

What does it mean to be successful in the context? What do I need to do to be successful? What are the costs and benefits of my actions for different groups of stakeholders?

What do dominant values of ‘success’ look like in this context? How does this expression of success articulate with my own attitudes, values and beliefs?

What does risk mean for me in this context?

What differences/contributions do I want to make?

What roles and identities are made available? How do these play with or against alternative ways of doing and being?

We contend that such a approach will properly re-position students as *students* of the workplace agentically, dialogically and critically engaged with workplaces as complex, contingent systems. Furthermore we argue that this approach will enable students, particularly those who are first generation higher education participants, to develop meta-understandings of the workplace and recognise the ways of being and doing (identities, allegiances, affiliations, attitudes, behaviours and structural relations) that pattern and frame workplace interactions, understand their own positionality within those relations and make decisions, based on thoughtful, self-conscious assessments of risk, about their own participation. To this end we invoke Gee’s ‘bill of rights’ (2000: 67) about literacy. All young people, Gee argues, but most especially minority and poor children have a right to: situated practice; overt instruction that supports reflexivity and meta-awareness; critical framing; and finally and perhaps crucially the right to transform and produce knowledge. The L4E framework offers, we suggest, a strategy for an employability curriculum design that is responsive to these priorities, useful most especially to those students who do not experience work place identities as ‘fish in’ (Bourdieu 1992: 127). Furthermore we contend that the processes of L4E, the use of an app to frame and support ethnographic approaches to practice offers a broader potential for curriculum building in professional and vocational education.

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1. White papers are policy documents produced by the UK Government that set out their proposals for future legislation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB is a national UK charity that provides independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. The CAB aims to provide the advice people need for the problems they face, for example legal and financial advice, and improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)