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# The relationship between 'employability' and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Caribbean university education

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University education in the Caribbean shows a bias towards developing the employability and work-readiness of students but the university might not be the right place to attempt to fulfil such ambitions. There is conflict between the role, function and purpose of university education and the drive towards employability. This paper argues that the notion of employability cannot be served by the current iteration of university education and that a more thoughtful approach to meeting the needs of our students, drawn from the scholarship of teaching and learning, is needed.

**Key words:** employability, university, scholarship, teaching, learning, Caribbean

## Introduction

The purpose of university education is not clear: its function is a matter of perspective, dispute and flux (Carr, 2009; Silver, 2007). The debate is affirmed and rebutted with conceptual definitions of the functional (teaching students so that they are ready for employment); the transactional (encouraging students to engage with the established hegemony), and the critical (inciting students to challenge prevailing paradigms). Not only is the function of the university a matter of debate but the relationship between the university and the society it exists within is not fixed, something Barnett (2000) discusses as the 'supercomplexity' of the modern university, commenting that the university will always be 'behind the game' when it comes to keeping pace with a fast changing world and suggesting that education cannot prepare students for jobs but should instead attempt to prepare them for uncertainty.

Preparing students for uncertainty is a difficult task and one that may be especially problematic in the Caribbean where the education systems are rooted in the past and imbued with the ideologies of former colonisers (Brown & Conrad, 2007; Jules, 2008). The established hegemonies have developed educational systems that show an inclination towards traditional pedagogies (Roberts, 2003); where teacher training is often basic (James, 2010); methods are often didactic, and systems remain anchored by centralised, hierarchical, flip-flop politics (Amadio, 2009; Rampersad, 2010). Yet, whilst 'traditional' educational methods are still evident, in many areas there is a growing movement of practitioners who

see themselves as thoughtful, reflective and student-/person- centred (Jennings, 2001). Nowhere should this be more evident than in the university – a place where independence is developed and a place where self-efficacy can lead to personal growth. The university is transformative not merely through education but also through environment, experiment, experience and exposure.

Given the historical and political context, university education across the Caribbean has been influenced and shaped such that shared developmental trends in ideologies are evident (Bacchus, 2005) thus, whilst it is hard to identify Caribbeaness, it is possible to see this shared history as having developed educational intentions built along similar lines (Jules, 2006) such that universities across the region do not display widely divergent dispositions.

The present bias of university education in the Caribbean might be thought to be the focus on employability and work-readiness (Beckles, Perry & Whiteley, 2002). This preconception charges university education to develop skilled graduates who are ready for the labour market. This paper argues that this present focus within Caribbean universities cannot be served by the current iteration of university education and that a more thoughtful approach to meeting the needs of our students, drawn from the scholarship of teaching and learning, is needed. Such an approach would address the supercomplexity of the modern university and would also work to locate university education within a specifically Caribbean context. Here it is proposed that focusing on teaching students so that they may become 'employable' reduces what it is to be a university; reduces educational practice to mere instruction, and reduces educational learning to mere remembering. Instead a counter proposal is offered, one that replaces this labour force facilitation focus with notions of enquiry-based learning and constructivist meaning-making activity. If the Caribbean is to be perceived as modern (and this is not a universally agreed aim) then educational paradigms need to be problematized – here lies the task of the scholarship of teaching and learning in the Caribbean today: to reposition education so that real learning is at the centre.

## The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and employability

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) involves the ongoing critical inquiry of practitioners into how learning can be best supported and how practice can be transformed to best support learning (Boyer, 1990; Hutchings & Schulman, 1999; Trigwell, Benjamin & Prosser, 2000). As such SoTL aims to improve learning through improving teaching.  Akerlind (2007) proposes five approaches to developing as a university teacher:

1. Becoming familiar with what to teach
2. Becoming familiar with how to teach
3. Becoming more skilful as a teacher
4. Becoming more effective as a teacher
5. Becoming more effective in facilitating student learning

A philosophy of SoTL need not be tied to traditional or progressive conceptions of practice, and it is possible to embrace SoTL whilst pursuing a goal of employability. But, if creating a workforce is the current focus of university education in the Caribbean, the type of thoughtful teaching that Akerlind's second, third, fourth and fifth approach suggest it is not the best way to do so:

> A curious feature of education emerges. Other ways of changing people's behaviour are far more effective. Other methods and processes more surely and quickly produce results…. Education cannot be rationalized into procedures that will produce particular results
>
> (Dillon, 2010, p. 6)

This leaves us with some room for debate as to what the function of a university might be. In such a situation, those of us inclined towards student-/person- centred education, humanism and reflection might feel frustrated by practitioners who have never thought to embrace anything other than a traditional 'chalk and talk' perspective. This is because the 'need' to train the next generation is apparent (to them) if we are to meet the drive towards the classification of the Caribbean as 'developed'. Such an approach may fill jobs but may also limit future development through overlooking the benefits of fostering independent thinkers. For Caribbean universities, in their current iteration, to focus on employability reduces, relegates or removes the need for the SoTL since, if we are only to teach the next generation how to 'do' jobs, the best way to do so is probably not through reflective debate and reflexivity but through more traditional methods. Why then bother with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in a context focussed on training the next generation of workers?

### Empowering students

Prosser and Trigwell (1999) highlight two categories of teaching: Information Transfer/Teaching Focus (ITTF) and Conceptual Change/Student Focus (CCSF): ITTF describes a model in which practitioners see their role as transmitting knowledge whereas CCSF involves practitioners considering their role in relation to students' conceptual development. Lueddeke's (2003) research on reflective scholarship in university education found that the higher the CCSF orientation the greater the levels of student engagement. If we regard education merely as a flow of information from teacher to student then we negate the impact of learning. The conflict between the head-fillers (ITTF) and the concept-developers (CCSF) parallels the modern philosophical conflict about what a university is for. The modern university might be thought of as a place that seeks to develop critical thinkers who are flexible and ready for life-long learning but how does this square with the concept of employability? The employability mission is about passing on

the 'rules of being' for the moment a student graduates so that he/she is ready to work and ready to become a cog in a Durkheimian machine. Such a mission has no need for the questioning mind of an autonomous individual; therefore developing employability cries out for a pedagogy drawn from tradition and infused in instruction.

All this is set against the background of an older generation who claim that the young are out of control and therefore need to be 'controlled' but such regulation should not be externally enforced through Marx's Ideogical Superstructure (1932) nor should it be internally coerced through Orwell's doublethink (1949) or Foucault's Panoptican (1977) but real control is a feature of self-empowerment, where an individual is fully informed and makes an active choice about their actions.

Real control is not a feature of transmission-based education for, in such a system, the practitioner is always the one who holds power through holding knowledge. Real control is transactionally enacted through the sharing of current knowledge and the generation of new knowledge. For this to happen in the university students need to be given autonomy and choice and their voice must be heard. Students are the future but the future starts now. Therefore we should educate as a means to empower students in the present rather than in the hope of training them for some abstract future. In this way, students can learn to address the complexity of modern life through engaging with the supercomplexity of the modern university. New teaching methodologies, based in the SoTL, aim at developing practice so as to empower students in the hope that they may impart real change and self-actualise. Job-filling and mind-opening are not mutually exclusive proposals and the skilful practitioner may be able to blend the two but, it is my assertion, such a practitioner must have moved beyond merely attempting to pass on the curriculum to a place where they are reflecting on and considering the acts of teaching and learning.

## Employability and the 'real' world

There are two key arguments against university education which is focussed on student empowerment and concept change:

1. We need to give students employability skills
2. We need to get students ready for the real world.

Neither of these two arguments hold. The first is the more convincing since most students will end up working somewhere. But it is premised on two ideas: that the university can do this and that the university is the right place to do this. The workforce of the university is not like that of other institutions, it is made up of people who are singularly focussed and who are detached from business, manufacturing, commerce and other sources of employment. Some university practitioners may have come from such sectors but they have now found their niche in a place that

welcomes thought, isolation and detachment. Universities are 'unique' places - distinct from other corporations, industries and institutions (Pollock & Cornford, 2004) and, as such, the workforce of universities is not like that of other businesses. Within the university, practitioners tend to study one particular area in depth and their actions "revolve around the acquisition of assets that are invested with value in the field" (Barnett, 2005, p.29). Such academic introspection develops practitioners who have the wrong personal historical understanding to pass on information about employability and leaves some "distance between the universities and the professions who employ their students" (Hussey & Smith, 2009, p.89).

Not only are the employees of a university the wrong people to pass on conceptions of employability but the physical place that is a university is not the right place for such activity. The space of a university aims to embrace contemplation, individual growth and learnedness – these are not constructs that are necessarily needed in business, manufacturing and banking, where things need to be done quickly in order to keep up with market trends, counter competitors and get the product to the consumer before it is out of date. The 'product' of university is not like this and does not go out of date.

The notion of 'getting students ready for the real world' is problematic since it begs the question: where are they currently living? There is only one world and all of it is real. 'Getting students ready for the real world' sets the world of work above other possible activities and supposes that all that is not-work is not-real. Work may be part of human existence but it is not the 'real' part. What about developing relationships; shopping for goods; liming with friends; going to the beach; raising children; supporting elderly parents, and the hundred other things we do? Are these not 'real' activities? Students are currently living in the real world and if it has been decided that the 'real world' is important then we all need to stop and scrutinise what we are currently doing. We need not 'get ready' for the 'real world' in the same way that we would not 'get ready' for a meal we are already eating.

**Three challenges for Caribbean university education**

In order for students in the Caribbean to be ready for their futures we need to problematize how the university can help this to happen. Traditional information transfer pedagogies are not suited to such a task, instead practitioners need to consider how they might work with students so that they can become actualised in the present and, therefore, ready for future challenges. To do this scholars of teaching and learning in Caribbean universities face three important challenges:

1. Developing student-/person- centred education so that all involved grow and benefit
2. Developing a philosophy of education that embraces critical thinking and independence
3. Attempting to face challenges 1 and 2 within a specifically Caribbean context

University education in modernity, in both the developed and developing world, is moving from the transmissional to the interactive and the discourse of partnership in the construction of knowledge continues to asseverate from a whisper to a shout. Within a university discourse of scholarship, the construct 'employability' is redundant as critically engaged students will accord with the needs of employers. A model of Caribbean university education that is student-/ person- centred, reflective and contextualised not only embraces the concept of the student 'voice' but is sterile and meaningless without it. Rather than see students as the recipients of knowledge the system needs to move to one of constructed understanding. To attempt to have interactive, transacted knowledge run side-by-side with the delivery of employability skills is to attempt to be both colleague and master. In repositioning Caribbean university education so that real learning is at its centre, the scholarship of teaching and learning offers scope for both individual and societal fulfilment.

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