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DEVELOPING CAPABILITIES AT A NEW ZEALAND TERTIARY INSTITUTION: FROM FOREIGN LEARNERS TO SOCIALISED INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Behnam Soltani and Jean-Philippe Loret

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many international students choose to study a degree program in tertiary institutions in developed countries in the hope of improving their socioeconomic status. In so doing, they often embark on a social and cultural journey. Yet, however rich the experience might be, it comes along with challenges which are directly related to encountering a different social and cultural academic space – difficulties which international students need to overcome so that they can proceed to graduation.

Our purpose in this paper is to present international students' points of views on their learning as a way of becoming employable – or, as they are sometimes referred to, work-ready graduates.

This paper is part of a larger study of a group of 180 international students who were enrolled in an undergraduate program in New Zealand. The paper reports on the experiences of students studying New Zealand Certificate in English Language at a New Zealand tertiary institution. In this paper, we report on their learning experiences during their first months of study in their tertiary institution.

The moment when an international student enters into a relationship with a new social and cultural environment is a very sensitive one. This moment marks the time when, on the one hand, they must adapt themselves to a new social and academic space while, on the other, they need to devise learning strategies and sociocultural approaches in order to fit the new institution's social and cultural spaces. Thus, this paper deals with diverse issues that nevertheless eventually take convergent paths: employability, learning, capabilities and identity.

These overarching concepts are combined in order to answer the central question posed in this paper – How do international students understand and evaluate their *employability development?* In answering this question, we first undertake an overview of education and employment today. Second, we discuss the concept of capability that we use in conjunction with the notions of identity and learning. Third, we consider a notion that is central to this study – "community of practice" a concept coined by Lave and Wenger (1991). Fourth, we present our findings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

International students leave a familiar space to go abroad, and often enter a different social and cultural space for study purposes. As Block reminds us, "when individuals move across geographical and psychological borders, immersing themselves in new sociocultural environments, they find that their sense of identity is destabilized and that they enter a period of struggle to reach a balance" (2007, p. 864). In this context, we question how international students see and understand themselves as (1) second language learners and (2) as work-ready graduates.

We are assuming that international students, like other students, are fully aware of their educational mission – to develop a set of capabilities that will set them on a path to operating in an increasingly global life and work context. They are also aware that a tertiary institution is the place where they will learn and acquire, even if partially, the capabilities that they will need to achieve these goals. In this sense, the tertiary institution can be said to communicate with them.

In this section, we discuss the concepts of employability, capability, learning and identity, in the context of setting out the various challenges faced by international students when studying abroad.

Employability

In a 2006 study of higher education in the UK, Mason, Williams, Crammer, and Guile (2006, p. 464) observed a recent change in employment requirements:

> In the wake of … the increase in global market competition experienced by many employers, UK universities came under intense pressure to equip graduates with more than just the academic skills traditionally represented by a subject discipline and a class of degree. A number of reports issued by employers' associations and HE organisations urged universities to make more explicit efforts to develop the 'key,' 'core,' 'transferable' and/or 'generic' skills needed in many types of high-level employment.

This phenomenon is not unique to the UK; it has affected tertiary institutions in many developed countries including New Zealand. One result has been an influx of international students into these countries. In fact, since the 1990s, the number of international students in New Zealand has increased massively. Between 1995 and 2015, numbers increased from under 10,000 to more than 60,000 (Education Counts, 2017). The contemporary context of globalisation has encouraged scholars to reformulate the question of graduate *employment*. Whereas in the 1980s and '90s, courses were mostly based on the idea of amassing a set of skills allegedly required by employers, in recent years researchers have called for a more holistic approach (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017, pp. 88-90).

As a consequence, over the last two decades, the concept of *employment* – conventionally used to measure students' academic outcomes – has drawn less and less attention and *employability* has increasingly been preferred over it.

Although employment is closely associated with concepts such as 'skills' and 'competence', which perhaps carry with them the idea of fixity, employability is associated with the concept of capability. Stephenson (1998) makes a clear distinction between competence and capability. If the former is "primarily about the ability to perform effectively, concerned largely with the here and now," the latter term "embraces competence but is also forward-looking, concerned with the realization of potential" (Stephenson, 1998, p. 2). He argues that capability is "an integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding used appropriately and effectively"(p. 2). He emphasises that capabilities are not only used in familiar contexts and to solve common problems, but can also be mobilised in unfamiliar contexts and to meet changing circumstances.

This shift in terminology reflects an attempt to describe the life-long learning process in which the international students of today are involved. According to Rowe and Zegwaard (2017, p. 89), today's graduates need to "manage uncertainty, ambiguity, and unpredictability" in an increasingly unstable labour market, a situation for which a fixed set of skills is no longer sufficient and relevant. In our digital age, with the fast-changing knowledge requirements of employment roles and their related performance characteristics, definitions of competence or fixed outcomes are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Over the past 30 years, there have been major changes to the ways in which human performance has been described and measured, meaning that the concept of capability is increasingly relevant.

However, a close reading of the extensive literature on *employability* reveals that this concept would better be understood in terms of a process of acquiring *employability capabilities*, which implies an ability to perform professionally in workplace environments and beyond. As Holmes (2001, p. 12) argues, capabilities are relevant to 'performance,' which he explains as follows:

> Despite the rhetoric surrounding the skills agenda, it is by no means clear that employers
> should want skills per se; rather, they want the graduates they recruit and employ to perform
> in desirable ways – competently and effectively. This is the behavior, or performance that is
> required.

Thus, performance is not only about technicality – being able to perform a task; it is also, and mainly, about behaviour – being able to act and think professionally. The notion of *performing employability capabilities* thus allows us to devise a very holistic understanding of what employability might be; and, in so doing, to offer a more detailed representation of the complex social processes at work in learning and acquiring capabilities.

Community of practice

From what has been said above, we understand capability as a social construct by means of which individuals participate in the practices of their socio-academic communities of practice (hereafter CofPs) and express their knowledge of the norms, rules and expectations of their communities. The concept of CofP, coined by Lave and Wenger (1991), helps to describe how newcomers to a community learn the norms of the community from its more experienced members through legitimate peripheral participation. Thus through observation, and by standing in the periphery of the community, little by little learners move towards fuller participation in the community and its norms.

The participation of the members in such practices led Lave and Wenger (1991) to introduce the concept of communities of practice (CofP). The focus of a CofP is its in-situ or local practices, which are closely related to doing and knowing. In other words, any practice that is engaged in by social actors in a community stems from what their society does and knows. The doing and knowing of a community constitute that community. Its practices include all the abstract and concrete attributes of a given community and are the result of social interactions. These practices are both collective and individual – while there are shared norms among the community members, at the same time there are individual differences. Thus it is through practices that individuals enact their identities in complex ways.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) have defined a CofP as

> [a]n aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways
> of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in
> the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a CofP is different from the traditional
> community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the
> practice in which that membership engages.

During this process of becoming an active and experienced member of a CofP, learners also navigate from one CofP to another within a landscape of practice. They negotiate their multiple memberships as they encounter different boundaries and translate their learning from one part of the landscape to another. When several communities of practice engage in interactions with one another, they form a landscape of practice (hereafter LofP) (Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O'Creevy, Hutchinson, Kubiak, & Wenger-Trayner, 2014). A LofP has been defined as an entity having "shared practices, boundaries, peripheries, overlaps, connections, and encounters" (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014). Individuals can move between many communities and have multiple memberships in them. Each community is known by its own practices. Boundary encounters are sites of learning which create special opportunities and challenges for learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger study that used a narrative frame methodology to collect data from 180 international students from China, Hong Kong, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Nepal at a New Zealand tertiary institution. This aspect of study focused on 45 students who completed the New Zealand Certificate in English Language. The frames use sentence starters to elicit responses from participants about their experiences from their own perspectives (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). The qualitative data analysis software package Nvivo11 was used to analyze the data collected. Data were first coded after which themes emerged out of the codings.

FINDINGS

How do international students see themselves as learners and as work-ready students? Looking at the data we gathered, the first conclusion we can draw is that employability – the process of being employable – is understood first in terms of being able to socialise, to communicate with the target-language group (here English). Being employable is to be able to communicate in English.

Jane, a Chinese student, makes it clear that "the most important part is the communication with people." Max, a Nepali student, explains that "the capabilities I thought would be important to learn was being able to express my thoughts into my writing." Similarly, Sukhwinder, an Indian student, thinks that "communications skills are more beneficial to communicate with each other and sharing idea[s] for a better study."

It is understandable that international students would emphasise communication capabilities. Developing communication skills is their major concern, as they now live in a country where English is the lingua franca and the medium of instruction and, eventually, will be the key to getting access to the local and the global labour market. This capability, that they will partly develop in New Zealand tertiary institutions, is transferable in any workplace in the country, and to many abroad. International students are conscious that to perform in any workplace they need to reach a certain level of English-language proficiency. This is also a key element in joining a CofP where communicating in English is an essential capability – a prerequisite to being involved and active within it.

Although understandable, it is surprising that none of the participants specifically mentioned work-related capabilities acquired during the first few months of their studies for the New Zealand Certificate in English Language. Nonetheless, this disconnect between the capabilities learned at the tertiary institution and those necessary for the workplace rapidly faded. When the same students were asked to think back about their learning trajectory, they all used the same discourse. In the case of communication capabilities that at the time were more an academic concern than a professional one, they considered that they had learned specific, work-oriented capabilities from them. Thinking back to his experience at the tertiary institution and reflecting on his academic experience, Sukhwinder concluded that he had learned "lot of things relevant to [his] studies, like how […] to do work with a group […], sharing different ideas with each other and get[ting] more knowledge." Similarly, Sagar, an Indian student, found that university had helped him to develop professional capabilities such as "time management" and "problem solving."

Through learning what might at first be perceived as a purely academic capability, communicating in English in an academic environment, all the participants learned "employability capabilities" that set them on the right path to becoming work-ready graduates.

Probably the most interesting findings of the study were the capabilities they thought were of particular importance – those that enabled them to function socially and culturally in appropriate ways. Max revealed that "[b]eing a student is a challenge and being an international student is even a bigger one. Consequently, I had to deal with academics' challenges, social isolation, and cultural adjustment in the very first week in [name of tertiary institution]." In line with Max's comments, Nishit mentioned that the first challenges he encountered were the "rules and education system of New Zealand which [are] totally different from my country's education system."

With these twin issues of social isolation and cultural appropriation, what is at stake is the idea of socialisation. This concept is really important for the students, who see it as the key to being accepted and recognised by others as part of the local community. Developing this attribute is very important in New Zealand society, where strong sociocultural capabilities are necessary and expected. This capability, alongside that of understanding different educational contexts, is of primary interest as these capabilities are not shared with – and often not expected from – local students. And, at some point, they will bring added value in educational terms, as capabilities that can be highlighted in the context of the labour market.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thinking about the issue from a global perspective, we must not forget that being employable implies constructing a new identity for oneself. Thus, international students need to learn the target language, learn the necessary employability capabilities and, above all, learn how to appropriate their new social and cultural spaces – and perform all these tasks simultaneously. Ideally, this learning should take place through a dynamic process whereby communication capabilities and employability capabilities echo social and cultural capabilities, and vice-versa.

Finally, an implicit contradictory expectation is evident here. On the one hand, it is expected that international students should appropriate a new sociocultural space when at the same time they are working to become internationally employable. This situation raises two questions: (1) How can international students overcome this paradox? (2) How can tertiary institutions help international students to overcome the many challenges that stand in their way and become employable?

Dr Behnam Soltani completed a PhD in applied linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington. He has extensive teaching and research backgrounds and is now a senior research fellow on the Learner Capability research project at Otago Polytechnic.

Dr Jean-Philippe Loret holds a PhD in French literature. After having taught at SciencesPo Paris and studying at Victoria University of Wellington, he now teaches cultural expressions in the Sport and Education Department of the University of Nantes. He is a teacher–trainer and also teaches pedagogy to teachers of French literature.

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