Media industries, education and employability

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Our Survey Said …

According to the Confederation of British Industry (2009) Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the World of Work report, “when asked in a CBI survey what universities should prioritize, 82% of employers chose ‘improving students' employability skills’, suggesting this should be a key focus for universities”. The emphasis on ‘employability’ has been made clear in a number of recent government reports, and the Browne Review (2010) further cemented the prominence of employability in the core activities of Higher Education Institutions. In relation to media education, Sue Thornham and Tim O’Sullivan’s discussion (2004) of their three-year HEFCE Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning project identified the increasing concentration on ‘employability’. More recently, the 2008 Department for Culture, Media and Sport Creative Britain report works from the position that a range of media industries are ‘creative industries’ and addresses how ‘talent’ can be fostered to ensure full contributions to the ‘creative economy’. Whilst attentive to the broader implications of these positions and strategies for higher education, I want to focus specifically on how questions around employability connect closely with ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ debates that have been an ongoing part of discussions on media education.

Perspectives on professional practice

If engaging students in terms of employability extends to how we explore and make sense of students’ career aspirations and their potential future work contexts, then research on media industries and media work has an important role. Exploring employability with students is an opportunity to draw on this research in applied and personally proximate and meaningful ways. For example, when Gillian Ursell (see Ashton, 2011 for this and more references on ‘critical media industries analysis’) wrote on the television apparatus as a vampire ingesting youngsters at a low price from a large pool provided by the education system, how might this research be used with students to explore the status of work placement schemes, the forms of activity that are available and undertaken, workplace conventions and routines, and how they are positioned and feel?
Work placements and internships present a crucial opportunity for connecting the emphasis on employability and students’ investment in their futures with critical perspectives on the nature of employment within media industries. Existing reports, documents, studies, etc. have addressed: internships as an essential part of the career ladder (Unleashing Aspiration); creativity in student work-related learning in the public and not-for-profit sector (Creative Interventions); creative career patterns and connections between courses and careers (Creative Graduates Creative Futures; Creative Career Stories); and developing professional identity (Learning to be Professional Through a Higher Education). From and in addition to these reports, I would stress engagement with broader ethical questions of ‘media work’. For example, ‘unstable working conditions’ (Creative Graduates Creative Futures) and the National Union of Journalists ‘cashback for interns’ campaign. Employability and exploring ‘professional practice’ is an opportunity to locate research on media industries and media work in ways that are personally meaningful for students. As Henry Giroux’s (2000: online) asks, “what relation should public and higher education have to young people as they develop a sense of agency?”. 

A range of hugely insightful empirical research studies has addressed issues of working hours, job insecurity, and challenges of ‘upgrading the self’ (both in relation to media industries and more widely). These questions are central the situated and lived experiences of students undertaking part-time work, placements and internships as part of their degree course, and who then may go on to secure work as part of their longer term career plan. Employability addressed as part of media education is a space in which connections can be made that prompt and provoke students to evaluate, assess, challenge and contest understandings of industry structures, professional practice, and individual investments.

‘Researching the Media and Cultural Industries’

I have made some recent attempts to consider what a higher education undergraduate module on ‘Researching the Media and Cultural Industries’ might look this. This combines existing aspects of modules already in place and further ideas for curriculum development. An extended outline touching on aims and assessment is available (see Ashton and Thebo, 2010), and the following focuses primarily on the themes:

1) Amateur and professionalism
Under this theme, students could examine existing and emerging conventions and practices through which different forms of media work come to be understood as ‘professional’, and explore forms of amateur media production and user-generated content and ask how these engage with ‘professional’ media production?

2) Becoming and non-becoming
Under this theme, students are encouraged to consider how they give meaning to their activities and make sense of these in terms of ‘becoming’ a media and cultural worker. This is an opportunity to assess range of opportunities and options, consider expectations and aspirations, and extend beyond limited or narrowly focused perspectives (for example, as ‘making it as director’). As well as examining being a ‘cultural worker in-the-making’, they will explore the potential ‘non-becomings’ in terms of undesirable industry work practices and issues of identity positions and access.

3) Creative biographies
The Open University’s ‘Creative Biographies’ event in April 2009 posed instructive questions around the use of the concept for exploring the experiences of media and cultural workers and how these biographies are inflected by inequalities relating to class, gender, race, age and disability. Students could be introduced to questions from the conference which would be followed by sessions with guest lecturers discussing (in a panel containing students) their own lives and work in the media and cultural industries. Discussions and lectures would be filmed by student teams, who are also asked to source and share other ‘Creative Biographies’ from magazine articles, blogs, director’s commentaries, etc., for class discussion. This theme would focus on the intersection of industry and personal narratives.

4) Passions and precarity
A commonly circulated idea in relation to media work, are the passionate investments that individuals make in their work. Exploring these different forms of investment and attachment, this theme encourages a critical exploration of issues of pay, working conditions, and ‘precariousness’. Industry will be evaluated not just as something ‘to learn about’, but also as bound up with imminent ways and places of living and working. The ‘Creative Biographies’ lecture/discussion films and sourced materials could be reviewed and reassessed by students in this different context.

The overall aim under these themes is for accounts and discussions of employability to be informed by research conducted into employment
contexts. For example, work placements are a site both for increasing students’ ‘employability’ in the view of employers and for interrogating issues of access and exclusion. Similarly, ‘networking’ is a way to develop communication skills and develop important contacts relevant to recruitment working opportunities, and can be discussed in terms of exclusion and social capital. Questions of power and ethics run through much of this research and can be drawn on in exploring employability and articulating a response to Giroux’s question.

Approaches emphasizing that employability should be embedded within the curriculum rather than as a ‘bolt on’, could perhaps be seen under this conceptualization as less about the erosion of ‘subject-specific’ content and more as an opportunity to develop a programme of media employability education. Ample resources exist in teaching and learning literature for (media) educators in facilitating student personal development planning; with media industries and work research, media educators can engage students with, often empirically rich and in-depth, accounts that address issues of employment conditions and contexts. Media industries and work research can be a resource in the process of embedding employability within media education.

On one hand, these suggestions may be seen to reinforce vocational perspectives in which ‘doing media’ at higher education is a pathway into working in the ‘media industries’. On the other hand, these are not programmatic mandates. When/if students, perhaps more obviously on ‘media production’ courses, identify a desire to work as media practitioners (whether that be, for example, independent documentary filmmakers, freelance magazine writers or salaried television producers), then media industries and work research is an instructive resource for them that can be meaningfully located in terms of professional practice and employability.

Beyond these ‘top down’ suggestions, pedagogical research into students as ‘agents of change’ and student engagement in curriculum development present resources through which to explore how students with industry and career priorities can reflect on ‘industry’ (or, rather, industries) composition and characteristics, and what working in these contexts might entail. Furthermore, Andrew Chitty’s ‘manifesto’ call for researcher practitioners is a prompt for even greater engagement in analysis and research examining media industries. The case studies included in the Stepping Out report published by the Art Design Media subject centre of the Higher Education Academy (ADM-HEA) focused on creative and cultural sector practitioners in art, design and media
education and how “their engagement enhances their professional practice”. The importance of the role of the reflexive teacher practitioner was clear in the ADM-HEA reports, and Chitty’s suggestion around researcher practitioners seem to present the opportunity for further engagement with media industries research.

**Comments for a manifesto**

This contribution encourages making connections between critical media industries research and the situated experiences of media students who are enthusiastic about working within industry contexts and relate to themselves as future workers, and then sharing examples where this interplay can be examined with students. Promising efforts in this direction include, exploring the role of research practitioners and the sharing of curricula that work to make critical media industries research proximate in terms of students’ future industry career contexts. There remain critical interventions to be made on proposed changes for higher education and the status of ‘employability’. There are also some interesting openings and opportunities, and employability and media education could be one of these.

**References**


