

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE LEARNING AGENDA: A DEGENERATIVE PROGRAMME?

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Abstract

The vocabulary of learning is increasingly dominating higher educational discourse, at policy and practice levels. Terms such as 'learning outcomes' and 'learning and teaching strategy' have displaced earlier terms such as 'aims'/'objectives' and 'curriculum'. Teaching staff are exhorted to focus upon student learning, to 'facilitate' such learning, to encourage 'learning to learn'. New staff are required to undertake initial programmes in 'learning and teaching', and all are exhorted to gain membership of the Institute for Learning and Teaching. Theories and models of the 'learning process', primarily originating within individualist psychological theorising and research, are cited as valid sources for basing novel modes of educational intervention. Underpinning such discourse is a set of meta-theoretical assumptions, a paradigm in Kuhn's terms, which is rarely questioned. This paper challenges this 'learning agenda', particularly in respect of its validity and utility in explaining the process by which individuals make their trajectories through higher education and on to their post-graduation lives.

The paper argues that the concept of learning is systematically ambiguous: its meaning is different in different forms of discourse. In particular, the concept as used in psychological discourse differs significantly from its use in educational discourse. Key areas of such difference will be explored. Using Lakatos' notion of a degenerative research programme, it is argued that the currently dominant learning agenda must be viewed as suspect. Alternative perspectives, such as situated learning and theory and practice/emergent-identity model, provide for more progressive programmes, for research and practice. The potential application of this analysis is illustrated in relation to issues of participation, retention and employability.

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Introduction: the learning turn in the discourses of higher education

Over the past decade or more, there has been an increasing use of the terms 'learn', 'learning' and 'learner', and other verbal forms based on the root word 'learn', in the discourses of higher education. Such discourses range from those concerned with higher education policy to those addressing issues of pedagogic practice, including the discourses of research into higher education as is indicated by the title of this conference. Phrases that previously were rarely, if ever, used in respect of higher education have now become commonplace: 'learning outcomes', 'learning and teaching strategy', 'learning methods', 'lifelong learners', 'prior learning', 'independent learning', 'work-based learning', 'experiential learning', and so on. The National Inquiry chaired by (now) Lord Dearing gave its report the title 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). Teaching staff are encouraged to become members of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILT). What we might term the 'learning turn' in the discourses of higher education reflects similar developments in the wider discourses of education and training, where the terms 'learning organisation', 'organisational learning', 'management learning', and so on are commonplace in addition to the phrases listed above. Various developments in respect of policy and practice, both research and pedagogic, are framed in the new 'learning' discourse, forming what may be regarded as the 'learning agenda' which is generally regarded as positive and progressive. This paper seeks to challenge the taken-for-grantedness of the learning turn and the perceived progressiveness of the learning agenda.

Of particular issue in this paper is the effect of the learning turn on how the nature of the trajectory of students through higher education is construed, in relation to research, policy interventions, and educational practice. This arena of concern implicates issues of participation, retention, employability, along with critical concerns over financing of higher education, student (and graduate) debt, and the very nature of the role of higher education in contemporary society. Increasingly, the empirical phenomenon of the change, over a time period of about 3 years or so, of a person from new undergraduate to someone who is called 'a graduate', engaged in their post-graduation life, is construed as a 'learning process' undertaken by a 'learner', leading to 'learning outcomes'. These key terms form the basic concepts for the now-dominant research framework: using Kuhn's term (Kuhn, 1970), a 'paradigm shift' appears to have taken place.

A key assumption of the learning agenda as paradigm is that the concept of the learning process refers to some real phenomenon, *sui generis*, one which is naturally-occurring. Learning (the learning process) is viewed as taking place *within* (internal to) monadic *individual* human beings (although some approaches to learning regard human learning as similar in many respects to learning by lower-order animals): such individuals are termed 'learners'. The learning process is assumed to result in (*cause*) certain states, which may be termed '*learning outcomes*' (variously, states of beliefs, knowledge and understanding, value orientations, skills, competencies, capabilities, etc). Such learning outcomes are, it is assumed, amenable to *objective observation* (and measurement) in terms of behaviour. This latter assumption is of critical importance given that (purported) learning process is, in itself, not amenable to empirical observation; it may be inferred from the observation of changes in behaviour not attributable to physiological changes. On the basis of such assumptions, various research programmes are constructed, often connected with educational interventions established on the very hypotheses which the research purportedly seeks to test.

This paper will argue that there are serious flaws with this mode of framing. It will first be argued that the learning agenda is based on conceptual confusion in respect of its key terms, on the unrecognised systematic ambiguity of the term 'learning'. Then, drawing upon Lakatos' ideas concerning the methodology of scientific research programmes, it will be argued that the learning agenda constitutes not a progressive but a degenerative programme. It will be compared with a rival perspective which, it is suggested, provides a theoretically robust and empirically sustainable alternative.

The language of learning: muddled meanings

There are, we may note immediately, some clear problems with the meaning with many of the new terms that have arisen. The term 'learning outcome' logically refers to some after-the-event situation: to use that term prior to the relevant event is to misuse it, except when qualified by an additional term such as 'desired', 'anticipated', 'required' and so on. Yet frequently such additional, modal terms are not used; although it may be argued that these terms are implied, in practice the failure to make them explicit tends to give the notion of 'learning outcome' an air of substantiality. The phrases 'teaching and learning methods' and 'teaching and learning strategy' are particularly problematic. These are generally used in descriptions (or prescriptions) of the way that educational staff and/or institutions intend to (or should) help students to benefit from the educational programmes on which they are registered. In that sense, such staff and their institutions are not engaged in learning: it is the students of whom we may appropriately use the term 'learning'. Such phrases are, presumably intended to express the idea that the use of certain methods and strategies is designed to *bring about* learning, to *facilitate* learning. However, since the normal assumption would be that teaching methods and strategies are so designed, the additional use of the word 'learning' is redundant. Similar consideration of other key phrases in the new lexicon raises similar questions about their meaningfulness.

It might be argued that such criticism is overstated, that the new terms merely reflect changing style. However, this would be to ignore the extent to which language, thought and social action are intertwined. Wittgenstein's comment about the 'bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (Wittgenstein, 1953) should serve as a constant reminder to us, as should Andreski's warning that

"constant attention to the meaning of terms is indispensable in the study of human affairs, because in this field powerful social forces operate which continuously create verbal confusion..."
(Andreski, 1972)

If those who espouse the value of higher education, to society and to individuals, truly believe in the benefits claimed then it surely behoves them to ensure that they have a clear understanding of the key issues involved before attempting to intervene in its functioning. And if research is to help illuminate such issues, any change in terminology should be based, not on changes in discursive fashion and style, but on warrantable changes in the conceptual and theoretical frameworks for understanding.

The Systematic Ambiguity of 'Learning'

Within academic discussions, scant attention is paid to the clear fact that the term 'learning' is used in a variety of modes of discourse and the contexts for these. We may note, in particular, the following contexts:

- (a) mundane, ie as used in everyday interaction and conversation;

- (b) the political-economic arena, ie in policy discourse;
- (c) professional and academic psychology, particularly in respect of various modes of experimental research and related theorising;
- (d) the management of employees within work organisations, in relation to decisions about selection, deployment, and training and development;
- (e) the management of such organisations themselves, as in, eg the notion of the 'learning organisation';
- (f) the arena of education and training, especially in relation to credentialisation.

To *assume* that the term 'learning' is used *synonymously* in each mode of discourse is to render us liable to a fallacy identified as long ago as Aristotle who pointed out that many terms may be used *paronymously*. Aristotle gives the example of the term 'healthy' which may be used about an individual (a 'healthy body'), of a city, of diet and exercise, of complexion; we even talk of a 'healthy argument'. Clearly, the ways in which bodies can be healthy are not the same as the ways in which cities, diets, exercise or complexions (or arguments) may be healthy, although we may wish to say that there is some connection between the different meanings. Drawing upon Aristotle's example of 'healthy', (Flew, 1979) uses for the term 'systematic ambiguity' with

"words or expressions that may always have the same meaning when applied to one kind of thing, but have a different meaning when applied to another kind of thing."
(Flew, 1979)

This seems to accord with Austin's discussion of paronymity, whereby

"on different occasions of its use, [a] word may possess connotations which are *partly* identical and *partly* different..."
(Austin, 1961)

Waismann (1952) states that the term systematic ambiguity was coined by Russell in connection with his Theory of Types, but goes on to apply the term more broadly to the 'many-level structure of language'. Ryle discusses 'systematically misleading expressions', particularly whereby the syntactical form of sentence containing a certain word, appearing to describe some state of affairs regarding an object referred to be the term, may mislead us with regard to the meaning of the expression.

Given the variety of contexts of its use, the terms 'learn', 'learning' etc seem to be prime candidates for possible systematic ambiguity, and statements using such terms to be possibly systematically misleading expressions. Rather than assuming that the meaning of the terms remains stable across different contexts of use, we should heed Wittgenstein's advice to '*look and see* whether there is anything common to all' (Wittgenstein, 1953).

Uses of 'learning'

Examination of the use of the term 'learning', and associated notions such as 'capability', 'competence' etc, in these different modes of discourse shows that their meaning does *not* remain the same. As an 'untechnical' concept (Ryle, 1954) in mundane discourse, 'learning' differs in meaning from its use as 'technical' concept in education, or scientific psychology, or political-economic discourse. Such technical use carries what Ryle (op. cit.) calls 'theoretical luggage'; in Wittgenstein's terms, these are different 'language-games' (Wittgenstein, 1953). Failure to recognise such difference in meaning may be seen to have led to what I have referred to elsewhere as the 'contamination' of the meaning of the concepts when used in educational and pedagogic discourse (Holmes, 2000a).

A particular problem arises in respect of the different uses of the concept of learning, especially its use in *explanation* and its use in *evaluation* (Holmes, 2001a). The *explanatory use* of the concept can be seen where we seek to explain some (non-instinctive) behaviour, ie as the result of a 'process of learning' giving rise to certain 'states' (eg possession of some abilities, competencies, capabilities). This use is the primary one seen in psychological discourse: the concept of learning carries the 'theoretical luggage' referred to by Ryle (1954), especially with respect to the particular school of psychology within which the purported explanation is being used (behaviourist, cognitivist, etc). The *evaluative* use of the concept takes two forms. One form is where we express some *judgement* about another person, as the basis for some action we take. This is the use in the context of assessment (formative or summative) in educational and other pedagogic contexts, and also in the selection and appraisal situations in employment contexts. The other form of evaluative use is in the *prescription* (ie *pre*-scription) of what is to count as 'worthwhile', 'desirable', or 'required' in terms of the outcomes of some pedagogic intervention.

Such distinction between explanatory and evaluative uses of the concept enables us to address a number of puzzles in respect of learning. For example, is it possible for someone to learn something which is untrue (eg that Melbourne is the capital of Australia), or to do something wrongly? It is clear that people can come to believe, *and say they know*, many things which are untrue, and to behave in ways that are ineffective or counter-productive to what they seek to achieve. We might say that they have learnt to do so, if we are attempting to explain this situation; consider, for example, the notion of 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1973). However, when used in some form of assessment, for example within education or in employment, we would normally say that they have *not* learnt; this use of the concept is evaluative.

It is vital that we treat with great care any discussion about the 'value of learning', to be clear about whether we are using the term in an explanatory or an evaluative sense. Thus, statements such as

"Learning is the key to prosperity - for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole."

David Blunkett, (then) Secretary of State for Education and Employment, in foreword to 'The Learning Age'

We may presume that he would not wish to include in this bold claim such examples of learning as coming to believe that black people are inferior to white people, how to break into a car in 5 seconds, or a woman 'accepting' that she is the cause of her male partner's violent outbursts to her. The statement implies that it is *certain* types of learning that form 'the key to prosperity', and requires elaboration of what these might be if it is not to endorse undesirable learning. Such considerations indicate that the dual claim that 'learning is natural' and (all) 'learning is good' is unsustainable, as it confuses the explanatory use of the term with its evaluative use.

The logic and language of learning

A particular problem affecting any discussion of learning is that the term is used in everyday, mundane discourse, particularly in the form of statements that *appear to be descriptive*. Closer examination of the logic of such statements indicates that the matter is far from simple. In his attack on the Cartesian doctrine (or 'myth') of the mind-body split, Ryle subjects dispositional statements, and statements about purported mental occurrences, to

extended analysis (Ryle, 1949). Applying Ryle's analysis to the language of learning suggests that:

- a) statements in the past tense, ie of the form 'S has learnt (to) X', should be regarded as semi-hypotheticals; and
- b) the verb 'to learn' when in the present tense, of the form 'T is learning (to) Y', should be treated as a '*success*' or '*achievement*' verb, not a task verb (ie not as an activity) (Holmes, 1998)

By semi-hypotheticals, Ryle means statements which have a law-like quality in the way we use them

"They apply to, or are satisfied by, the actions, reactions and states of the object; they are inference-tickets, which license us to predict, retrodict, explain, modify these actions, reactions, states."
(op. cit., p.119)

Thus, in the context of whether a child (Jack) should be allowed to take a boat out on a pleasure lake, to say that 'Jack has learnt to swim' may serve to predict that he would be able to swim, and *will* swim if he falls out of the boat. By 'success' verbs, Ryle is pointing out that there is a range of words applied in relation to occurrences and events, which because they are active verbs tend to confuse us as to their logic. Examples cited include 'win', 'cure', 'convince', 'cheat' and others. So, to say that 'Mary is winning the cross-country race' is not reporting that Mary is undertaking an additional activity to that of running a cross-country race; rather, it is to say that the manner in which she is undertaking the activity of running the race is likely, if maintained, to yield a particular result. Put crudely, success verbs, says Ryle, belong not to the vocabulary of the player but to the vocabulary of the referee.

On the basis of this analysis we can say that the verb 'to learn', in various grammatical forms, does not refer to some activity performed by someone. Rather, when we examine how we use the term we can see different jobs that it performs within particular contexts. When used in the past tense, its primary use is to make a dispositional statement, one that licenses or warrants inferences about performance, in the past, the present or the (anticipated) future. When used in the present tense, and sometimes in the past tense, it serves to make an evaluation of success of certain well-understood tasks, which are either observable or can be elaborated in terms of observable activities. Such activities include studying, reading, practising, rehearsing, discussing, performed by the individual trying to learn (ie achieve the dispositional state of knowing understanding, being able to), and teaching, explaining, showing, questioning, and so on as performed by someone helping another to learn (succeed in studying etc). There is no need to assume that there is some *common process* invisibly taking place *within* individual entities; there is especially no need to posit some *activity*, called 'learning', that is performed by the individual, separate from and in addition to these activities. This is not to deny the usefulness of much of the research and scholarship within psychological studies of learning, but to attempt rein back the enthusiasm with which many people have treated such studies as 'breakthroughs' in an age-old field of human endeavour. The attempts by evangelists for 'learning' to displace well-established terms in the field of education and training by words and phrases (such as 'learner', 'learning facilitator', 'student-centred learning', 'learning goal', 'learning programme') tends to obfuscate rather than illuminate. As Winch puts it

"The rapid growth of the study of learning as a branch of psychology has been largely responsible both for the increase in information and the decline in clarity on the topic."
(Winch, 1998)

The learning agenda as research programme

In his analysis of the methodology of scientific research programmes, Lakatos (1970) sought to support Popper's methodological falsificationism whilst responding to Kuhn's arguments regarding paradigms and normal versus revolutionary science. He argues that Kuhn's critique of falsificationism, that scientists do *not* in their normal scientific practice seek to falsify theories but mostly work on 'puzzles' presented within the currently dominant paradigm, applies to 'naïve falsificationism'. Popper's approach is, rather, that of 'sophisticated falsificationism', within which

"a theory is 'acceptable' or 'scientific' only if it has corroborated excess empirical content over its predecessor (or rival), that is, only if it leads to the discovery of novel facts."

(Lakatos, 1970)

This contrasts with naïve falsificationism which accepts *any* theory which can be interpreted as experimentally falsifiable. Moreover, whilst naïve falsification regards a theory as falsified by a conflicting observation, sophisticated falsification only regards a theory as falsified if *another theory* includes the unrefuted content of the first theory, *and* has excess empirical content (predicts novel facts) *and* some of the excess content is corroborated. Lakatos uses the term 'theoretically progressive problemshift' to refer to the development of theory whereby there is excess empirical content over its predecessor. He uses the term 'empirically progressive problemshift' to theory development where some of the excess empirical content is corroborated. A problemshift, or new research programme, is termed 'progressive' if it is both theoretically and empirically progressive, and '*degenerative*' if not (op. cit.: 118).

Lakatos argues that sophisticated methodological falsificationism "offers new standards for intellectual honesty". That is, it demands

"that one should try to look at things from different points of view, to put forward new theories which anticipate novel facts, and to reject theories which have been superseded by more powerful ones."

(op. cit.: 122)

The work of Lakatos presents a challenge to the learning agenda as a research programme, if its proponents wish to abide by such 'standards of intellectual honesty'. First, it requires that rival perspectives must be entertained, subjected to the rules of acceptance and of elimination of sophisticated methodological falsificationism. Secondly, it requires that the learning agenda and rival perspectives should be compared on the basis of the extent to which either provides for a progressive theoretical *and* empirical 'problemshift'. The question is whether a rival perspective is available, and whether it provides corroborated excess empirical content.

As indicated earlier, the main area of interest for this paper is that of the phenomenon of individuals making their trajectories through higher education, from new students to graduates, over a period of three or more years. The learning agenda seeks to construe this as a process of learning resulting in outcomes in the form of certain 'key skills', transferable skills, 'capabilities', 'attributes', 'qualities' etc that are amenable to measurement. These learning outcomes are regarded as causally related to outcomes for individual graduates, particularly in respect of gaining, or failing to gain, suitable employment (a 'graduate job').

In the next section it will be argued that such rival perspective is indeed available, and that it meets the criteria for its acceptance and for the elimination of the learning agenda. The rival perspective will be referred to as as the 'practice/ emergent identity approach'.

Practice/ emergent identity approach

The main principles of the practice/ emergent identity approach has been elaborated elsewhere, particularly in relation to graduate employability (using the concept of 'graduate identity') (Holmes, 1999, 2000b, c, 2001b, 2002). It draws upon the interpretative, interactionist, constructionist traditions within the social sciences. A key founding principle is that socially salient human behaviour is not objectively observable: rather, the 'raw' activity of an embodied human individual must be interpreted as performance-of-a-particular-kind if it is to be meaningful to significant others, who respond to that interpretation. This accords with the key contributions of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), the notion of the analytical separation of movement, action and act (Harré and Secord, 1972), and the notion of act-and-supplement as the appropriate phenomenon for psychological study (Gergen, 1994).

The basis for any interpretation of behaviour as performance-of-a-kind is two-fold. There must be a set of practices within the relevant social arena, such that the activity is taken to be an attempt to engage in an instance of practice from that set. Secondly, there must be a set of identities, types-of-persons, within the social arena, such that the person engaging in the particular activity is taken to have the identity appropriate for engaging in the practice in question. In some types of social settings, the criteria for judging both aspects may be highly specified, eg in rituals. In other contexts, there may be a much lower degree of specification, for either or both element, leaving considerable scope for 'negotiation' and/or contestation over the meaning of certain behaviour (as exhibited, for example, in the supplementing acts of others). This accords with the findings of ethnomethodological studies (Garfinkel, 1967), particularly in respect of the 'indexicality' of social behaviour, ie its meaning is jointly constructed in the instance and context of its performance.

The term 'identity' as used above should not be taken in an essentialist manner, as an entity. Rather, the emphasis is upon the processes of *identifying*, by self and by others. As Jenkins puts it, from a range of perspectives on the issues of the self, role, and identity there emerges

"an understanding ... of the 'self' as an ongoing and, in practice, simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions offered by others. This offers a template ... of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* as the process by which all identities - individual and collective - are constituted"
(Jenkins, 1996)

To differentiate this concept from that of personal identity (identification of self by self) or that of social identity (identification by others), the term 'emergent identity' is used. By 'emergent', it is intended to convey that who-a-person-is-taken-to-be at any point in time and in relation to a particular context is emergent from the internal-external dialectic of identification, the negotiation between (attempted) self-presentation and ascription by others. Another way of putting this is that, what is salient in terms of a person's identity in a particular setting is the outcome of the interaction between the claim by the person on a particular identity (or disclaim of an identity ascribed) and the affirmation or disaffirmation of such claim. Various 'modalities' of emergent identity may arise in such negotiation, as figure 1 seeks to illustrate.

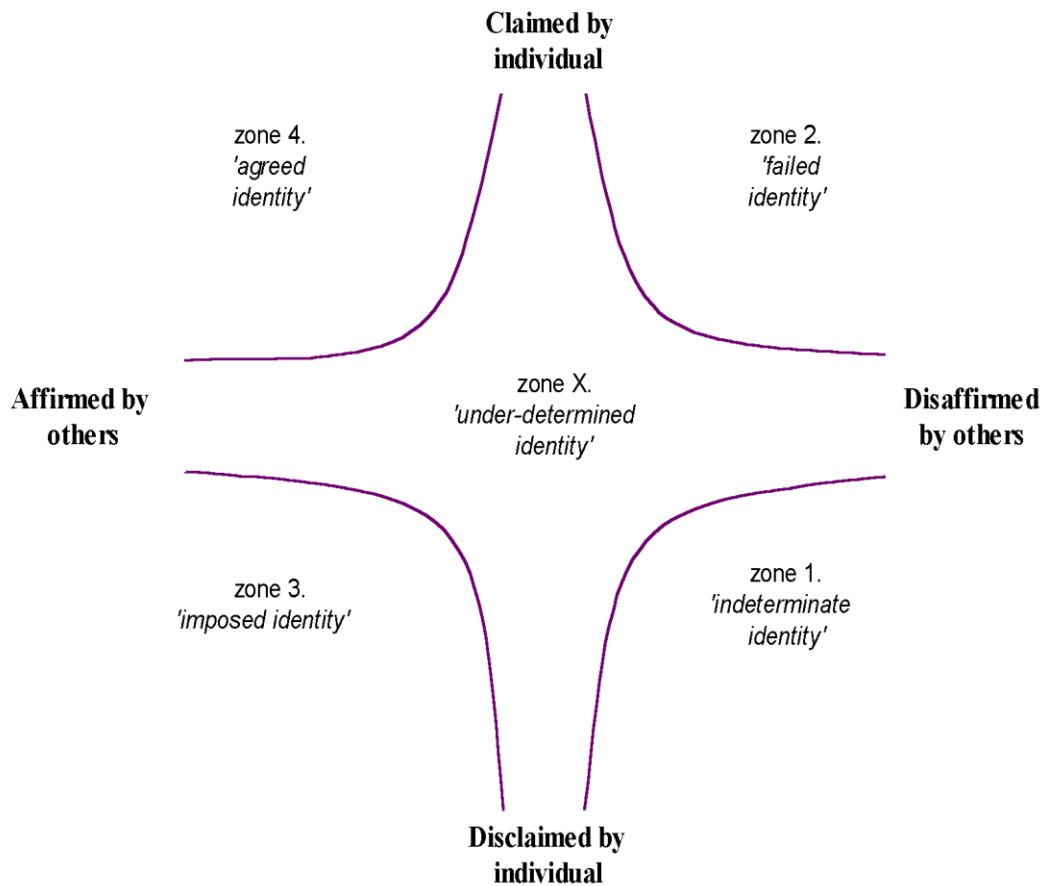


Figure 1: Modalities of emergent identity

Such a concept of emergent identity, and of its modalities, affords a model for considering various trajectories which individuals may take through 'identity projects' (Harré, 1983), or in Goffman's terms, 'moral careers' (Goffman, 1959). Moreover, the emphasis upon 'claiming' (or 'disclaiming') by the focal person, and 'affirming' and 'disaffirming' by significant others, draws attention to the modes in which such claims/ disclaims and affirmations/ disaffirmations are presented. These may be considered in terms of warranting and accounting, the use of conventionalised discursive devices (and other modes of symbolic communication) to attempt to gain acceptance by others to a certain construction of reality (Scott and Lyman, 1968, Draper, 1988, Gergen, 1989). In relation to the context of graduate recruitment, the language of 'transferable skills' may form the basis of effective warranting on the claim on the graduate identity (as someone worthy of employment in a 'graduate job', not merely possessing a degree certificate). The particular terms used in such language index, in a generalised manner, the types of practices which would normally be expected in the context of graduate employment, which the graduate claims to be able to undertake.

Comparing approaches

On the basis of the above limited sketch of the practice/ emergent identity approach, we may now consider how the learning agenda compares with that approach in terms of Lakatos' distinction between progressive and degenerative programmes. The issue is which of the rival

approaches has 'excess empirical content' that has been verified, providing explanation for facts which the other cannot explain.

One key area for comparison is that of the employment outcomes for graduates from different groups on the basis of socio-biographical characteristics. The learning agenda argues that an individual's employment outcome as a graduate depends mainly upon how well they learn, ie develop a set of transferable skills. This provides no explanation of the empirical findings regarding the relative poorer levels of post-graduation employment success of graduates from visible minority ethnic groups, or from 'lower' socio-economic classes, or who were over the age of 24 on entering higher education (Brennan and Shah, 2002). Or, at least, it can only explain such facts by claiming that people from such groups have failed to learn the 'skills' to the same extent as those from more successful groups, a claim which has no empirical corroboration and would generally be regarded as anathema. The more usual mode of explanation is to draw upon the notion of discriminatory action by employers. However, such explanation does not have any theoretical connection with the learning agenda, and breaches the Occam principle of parsimony. Even with such theoretical addition, the approach cannot explain the fact that *some* individuals from the groups associated with poorer employment outcomes *do*, in fact, achieve successful outcomes.

In contrast, the practice/ emergent identity approach provides an explanation for such facts. Employment outcome depends upon the extent to which the individual's claim on the graduate identity, someone worthy of employment as a graduate, is affirmed by gatekeepers to graduate employment. This is not a matter of objective fact as to what the individual has learnt (a set of skills) but, rather, one of what the individual *does*, ie how the claim is warranted. However, the matter is not solely within the individual's scope of action: it also depends upon the extent to which the claim is affirmed. This allows for discriminatory practices on the part of graduate recruiters, but also allows for the effect of recruiters' practices in recruiting from certain (types of) universities where, as a matter of fact, student demography does not reflect the wider student population in terms of key socio-biographical characteristics. No additional postulates are required to explain the empirical facts which the learning agenda fails to explain.

A further point of comparison is what appears to be an unusual consistency in retention rates amongst major graduate recruiters, over two decades in which there has been fluctuating economic conditions (Pearson et al., 2000). The retention rate after three years was shown to be just over 70% in surveys conducted in 1979, 1985, 1992 and 1999. How should we explain the fact that the figures for each survey are 'remarkably similar' (op. cit.: 18)? Again, the learning agenda provides no explanation. The practice/ emergent identity approach may explain in the following way. The graduates in question were employed by major recruiters, ie into what would clearly be viewed as 'graduate jobs'. An individual in such a position would thus have experienced having their claim on the graduate identity readily affirmed. After a period with the initial employer, the individual is likely to have high confidence that another prospective employer would readily affirm their claim on the identity of a graduate with considerable experience. This would not be significantly affected by economic conditions, for the individual would perceive themselves to be strongly placed in gaining new employment. Across the population of graduates in such employment, the timing of change of employer is thus likely to remain fairly static. The practice/ emergent identity approach thus provides for a progressive problemshift, whilst the learning agenda must be viewed as a degenerative programme.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to subject the learning agenda in higher education to critique, in relation to its dominance in the theoretical framing of the process of higher education for students from intake to exit. That critique has involved the conceptual analysis of the key notions within the mode of framing. These were shown to be deeply problematic. The paper has then considered the learning agenda, in terms of Lakatos' notions of progressive and degenerative research programmes, in comparison with the rival mode of framing presented by the practice/ emergent identity approach. It has been argued that the learning agenda fails to meet the test of explaining certain empirical facts concerning graduate employment, whilst the practice/ emergent identity approach passes that test. On that basis, it is argued, the former should be rejected in favour of the latter as the basis for research.

By extension, *any* aspects of the trajectories of students in higher education, including that of the initial period of 'becoming an undergraduate', may be framed in the terms of the practice/ emergent identity approach. Indeed, the issues of widening participation may also be so framed, that is, examining how individuals construe the identity of 'university students' and the extent to which such an identity is one they would wish to claim. The learning agenda has dominated higher education discourse for several years, but has shown little success in addressing such issues. Intellectual honesty, Lakatos' approach would suggest, demands that the rival approach be given proper consideration.

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