

Universities and the construction of a new generation gap

Universities today operate as institutions where a specific set of '21st century' skills and values are promoted. This is particularly the case with first-generation university students, where the attempt to move students away from the influence of their background is made explicit. One assumption here is that the role of the university should be to distance students from the norms, expectations, knowledge, and experiences of older generations – both inside and outside the academy. This paper investigates the extent to which the focus on skills and values disrupts the generational transfer of knowledge in favour of training to meet present-day economic and political imperatives.

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This paper discusses a trend in Higher Education, developed and consolidated from the 1990s onwards, towards the promotion of transferable skills and so-called 'graduate attributes'. This is linked to the changing purpose attributed to the University: a shift away from the promotion of knowledge derived from the past, towards a focus on the University as an institution designed primarily for the purpose of socialising young people into the economic and social demands of the present day.

What are transferable skills and graduate attributes?

[Reed recruitment consultants](#):

Transferable skills are a core set of skills and abilities, which can be applied to a wide range of different jobs and industries. They are usually picked up over time, and can be gained from previous positions, charity or voluntary work, your hobbies, or even just at home.

These are skills related to *employment*, not education. And indeed, they are only loosely related to employment. They are not distinctive vocational or professional skills, in the traditional sense; Reed [explains](#) that 'slightly softer skills than those directly related to a position'; and that soft skills are 'general attributes that aren't specific to a job or industry', and 'usually self-developed, meaning no training is needed to build them'. By implication, they cannot be taught.

But as anybody working or studying in HE today knows, the promotion of transferable skills has become embedded into both the curriculum, and the ethos, of higher education. More widely, at undergraduate and postgraduate level, as part of the 'employability agenda'. Foreword by Jo Johnson, Minister of State for Universities and Science, to the *Green Paper: Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*:

While employers report strong demand for graduate talent, they continue to raise concerns about the skills and job readiness of too many in the graduate labour pool. Recent indications that the graduate earnings gap is in decline, and that significant numbers of graduates are going into non-graduate jobs, reinforce the need for action.

Promoted by work of [Higher Education Academy](#), which 'works closely with the sector to identify the current key strategic issues in learning and teaching, such as retention, assessment and employability'. HEA teaches us how to teach employability skills.

So transferable, or 'soft' skills are clearly positioned within HE as things that can and should be taught. Institutions package this process of learned soft skills as 'graduate attributes' – the kind of person you become at (a particular) university. Here, the self-developed life skills discussed by Reed are repackaged as forms of behaviour, communication, and engagement that you develop thanks to being at university (and part of what you are paying for).

With the focus on developing employability, the generic is prized, while specific knowledge content is presented as incidental. For example, [Glasgow University's web page](#) on 'What are graduate attributes?':

Graduate attributes are the academic abilities, personal qualities and transferable skills which all students will have the opportunity to develop as part of their University of Glasgow experience.

If someone were to ask you what you did at university, you'd probably name the subjects you study. But you're actually learning to do all sorts of other things as well. For example:

Writing essays develops critical thinking and research skills

Posters and presentations are great practice in public speaking and communicating your ideas

Playing for a sports team improves your ability to communicate and work within a team

Running a club or society requires leadership and motivation

With a little thought, you can see that almost everything you can do at university is designed to help you develop useful skills, qualities and abilities – elements of yourself that you might never have discovered had you not come to Glasgow. We refer to these collectively as our graduate attributes.

Glasgow has even produced a Graduate attributes matrix:

http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_183776_en.pdf

These developments have interesting implications for how we think about the role of knowledge transmission and production in HE, and the role designated to the University in society.

Bernstein – classification and framing

Reflect on Bernstein's 1975 work 'Class and Pedagogies: visible and invisible'

Article examining 'invisible pedagogy and infant education'. The first thing to note is how relevant its insights on infant education – that is, the invisible pedagogy of education through play – are to recent developments in HE.

The mission of HE is increasingly becoming explicitly organised around the aims of socialisation and development – making graduates 'fit for employment' – rather than the promotion of specialised subject knowledge and the transmission of the cultural heritage. As the HEA [puts it](#):

How you help to prepare graduates for life beyond university is something at the forefront not just of students' minds, but also those of their parents.

'Those of their parents' – something we might want to bear in mind in relation to the liminal status ascribed to undergraduate students these days – neither children nor adults, students nor workers, in a continual process of transition, with the project of Higher Education relating more intimately to the family.

But back to invisible pedagogies. Bernstein characterises infant education as an invisible pedagogy, realised through weak classification and weak frames. Transferable skills, leading to graduate attributes, are also weakly classified. We can see this in their generic character – they apply to

whatever you study, operating outside of subject specialisation – even despite it? (Training PhD students to undo all the academic skills they have learned!)

They are also weakly framed – promoted jointly by academic staff, uni careers service, employers, HEA, but the preserve of none of these. There is no *specific* pedagogy of transferable skills – it is a promiscuous pedagogy, which hops between and across subject areas, displacing academic subject knowledge both explicitly and implicitly.

Implicit displacement

The implicit displacement of subject knowledge by the employability agenda is the easiest part of this process to grasp, and the most important. The reformulation of the role of the University around the responsibility to create ‘employment ready’ graduates runs directly counter to the role of the University in the transmission of knowledge. As such, it disrupts the generational relationship that lies at the heart of education.

My work on the sociology of generations has evolved, largely, as a conversation with the Hungarian-born sociologist Karl Mannheim, who situated his analysis of generations within broader work on the sociology of knowledge. His concern with generations arose from the question of how ‘the accumulated cultural heritage’ was transmitted, and the dynamic process by which knowledge is renewed as a result of ‘fresh contacts’ with a continually-evolving generational consciousness.

I don’t have time to go into enough depth here about ways in which Mannheim theorised the process of knowledge transmission and construction, and the development of generational consciousness: will just confine myself to a few points pertinent to the discussion of transferable skills and graduate attributes.

In describing the transmission of the accumulated cultural heritage, Mannheim discussed the role played by formal education and the passing on of ‘virtual’ or unconscious data through formative experiences and intergenerational contact (so, the family, but wider influences as well).

Mannheim saw the role of education – ‘the data transmitted by conscious teaching’ – as having a ‘more limited importance’ than implicit knowledge gained through ‘the automatic passing on to the new generations of the traditional ways of life, feelings, and attitudes’.

However, the transmission of both consciousness and unconscious data was made possible, he argued, because ‘generations are in a constant state of interaction’. The (biological) fact that there is one born every minute means that, as a society, we continually have to absorb new members into our knowledge of the world, our customs, and practices.

So what accounts for the emergence of ‘generation gaps’? Mannheim does not see generation gaps as a perennial feature of our society – they are quite specific occurrences, when wider events disrupt the seamless process of transmission. That is not to say that educating and socialising the young is a friction-free process – that young people come to our world with a different perspective than older generations is what Mannheim means by ‘fresh contacts’, and he sees this as crucial in the dynamic and ongoing reconstruction of knowledge.

But generation gaps are more rare, systematic, and troubling events, indicating that the social world inhabited by the young has become at odds with the formative knowledge of their elders and educators. This schism, he argued, tends to emerge during periods of accelerated social and cultural change. He wrote:

When as a result of an acceleration in the tempo of social and cultural transformation basic attitudes must change so quickly that the latent, continuous adaptation and modification of traditional patterns, thought, and expression is no longer possible, then the various new phases of experience are consolidated somewhere, forming a clearly distinguishable new impulse, and a new centre of configuration.

This 'new centre of configuration' is what we mean when we talk about a generation, in the sense of a generation that most clearly expresses the *Zeitgeist* of its time: the Generation of 1914, the Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials.

In this context, the task for society is how to mediate this gap between the generations; to ensure that the 'accumulated cultural heritage' is transmitted and renewed. In this context, the relationship between generations might be fraught, but it continues.

This is because education is about transmitting the cultural heritage from the past to the present. At times of great change and friction, certain elements of the cultural heritage might stand in question. Indeed, the authority of older generations, as mediators of the past, might be directly challenged – this was one notable feature of the Sixties student protestors, the *Zeitgeist* of the generation we know as the Baby Boomers. But because the relationship of knowledge transmission is between the past and the present, not everything is jettisoned. The relationship might be fraught, but it still exists.

What then of transferable skills? Transferable skills weren't around in Mannheim's time, and I am not going to second guess what he would have made of them. But I think it is fairly clear that the requirement that universities inculcate their students with a particular set of 'graduate attributes' attuned to the idea of what today's employers generally want runs counter to the idea of education as a relationship through which the accumulated cultural heritage is transmitted via a process of generational interaction. Mainly because their focus is the ever-changing needs and demands of *the present* – the past is whitewashed.

1. The emphasis on present-day imperatives – 'employability' – emphasises the irrelevance of the wisdom of the past. The constant discourse of novelty in education, which Furedi examines in his book *Wasted: Why education isn't educating*, is revealing in this regard. The message is that jobs aren't what they used to be, employers 'today' want X, Y, Z, and so the 21st-century graduate must be able to deliver X, Y, Z. Graduate attributes, then, are not things that can be learned from their older academic teachers – they have to be developed *in spite of them*.
2. The emphasis on generic skills runs against specialism, the *knowledge content* of teaching. This applies as much to vocational education as it does to academic courses – whatever somebody with professional, or educational, expertise is able to teach you is positioned as not just irrelevant to employability skills – it is antithetical, as these skills must float free from content.
3. Positioning the wisdom of older generations – academics, in this context – as problematic with regard to the skills you need to get a decent job has the effect of inciting, and flattering, a generation gap. The message given is – yes, maybe that eminent historian knows more than you do about the Roman Empire, or the Weimar Republic, but this knowledge bears no relevance to the rest of your life. The transmission of knowledge from generation to generation, rather than being seen as the central purpose of the university, is

compartmentalised as only one aspect of your experience as a student, and something detached from the rest of your life. As Glasgow University puts it:

If someone were to ask you what you did at university, you'd probably name the subjects you study. But you're actually learning to do all sorts of other things as well.

4. The generation gap we may be seeing emerging today is not only something that has occurred because of the shocks of wider social and cultural events – though these are important. (Edmunds and Turner – 9/11 generation – Millennials.) It is also one that is being *constructed*, through a political and policy focus on 'age', and through trends in education such as the promotion of graduate attributes. This is likely to exacerbate the tensions between the generations, and also – more worryingly – limit our ability as a society to mediate that generational relationship; to 'bridge the gap'.

The focus on transferable skills, then, is *symbolically* important, by displacing the value of subject knowledge and inciting and consolidating a gap between the generations. But how does this work itself through in practice?

Explicit displacement of knowledge

Universities continue to be organised around subject knowledge, and the relationship between academics and students. The transferable skills element of courses has, so far, been an add-on – or, maybe, something that we pay lip service to doing as part of our everyday teaching practice.

As the employability agenda begins to play a more dominant role in the governance of HE, we will see transferable skills becoming more explicitly embedded within the curriculum. This will have the effect of marginalising knowledge transmission – not only symbolically, but in practice.

The students whose education will be most affected by this are those at 'widening participation' universities: that is, broadly, post-1992, low-tariff entry institutions that struggle most in the league tables, with a higher proportion of students from non-middle-class backgrounds.

These are the students least likely to obtain 'good' graduate jobs – ergo, they are most likely to be targeted as in need of 'employability' skills. And as these students are often considered to be less able to manage a large volume of academically-demanding work than those at Russell Group universities, it is likely that curriculum content will be pushed out to make way for generic skills.

The irony, of course, is that from an educational point of view, what would benefit these students *most* is *more* knowledge – reading, writing, lectures on their subjects – because they tend to arrive at university with less education and related cultural capital than middle class students at more prestigious universities. Even in terms of 'employability', developing students' academic skills – formal writing, focused reading, and so on – is likely to be more beneficial than classes aimed at enhancing their 'personal qualities'.

In terms of class – weakly classified and framed skills that the middle class will be more adept at mobilising. Communication skills, personal qualities, particular kinds of life experience (travelling the world, internships etc).

The focus on inclusion and social mobility that has dominated HE for the past 20 years has consistently used the rhetoric of closing the class divide to move further in the direction of weaker classification and framing. Transferable skills and graduate attributes are the latest development in this process.

Not just about employability. Generic 'values', sustainability, social justice – 'graduates against the rest' (Brexit). Attempt to colonise internal world, esp of first generation students. Disorientation in setting against family.

While at least possible to educate children with lower levels of cultural capital to same standard as their middle class peers, much more difficult to boost the kind of cultural capital that comes with middle class wealth and habitus. Yet this latter cultural capital is where the focus is.

If we return to Bernstein, we can see that the most likely outcome of this approach is to widen the class gap, rather than narrow it.

In the context of infant education, Bernstein shows that 'the invisible pedagogy was first institutionalised in the private sector for a fraction of the middle class – the new middle class' (p.118). While '[t]he old middle class were domesticated through the strong classification and frames of the family and public schools, which attempted, often very successfully, cultural reproduction', in the new middle class:

... socialisation is into weak classification and weak frames, which promote, through the explicitness of the communication code, far greater ambiguity, and drives this class to make visible the ideology of its socialisation: crucial to this ideology is the concept of the *person* not of the individual'. (p.119)

Bernstein describes this shift, towards the reproduction of the person rather than the individual, as a consequence of the type of organic solidarity that arises from the division of labour within class societies:

Durkheim's individualised organic solidarity developed out of the increasing complexity of the economic division of labour; personalised organic solidarity, it is suggested, develops out of increases in the complexity of the division of labour of cultural or symbolic control which the new middle classes have appropriated.

He goes on to say:

The new middle class is an interrupter system, clearly not of class relationships, but of the form of their reproduction. In Bourdieu's terms, there has been a change in habitus, but not in function. This change in habitus has had far-reaching effects on the selective institutionalisation of symbolic codes and codings in the areas of sex and aesthetics, and upon preparing and repairing agencies, such as the family, school, and mental hospitals. In all these areas there has been a shift towards weak classification and frames. (p118)

I haven't got time here to discuss Bernstein's analysis of the class assumptions of the invisible pedagogy, and how these are reproduced in the context of infant education.

Nor I have got time to delve into the important questions that Bernstein raises about transition between stages of education, and whether his observations in 1975 – that the collection code at universities remains one of highly visible pedagogies, of strong classification and frames – still hold true today.

Provisionally, there seem to be two kinds of curricula operating in the 21st century British university – one strongly classified and framed around subject knowledge (or specific vocational skills), and the

other weakly classified and framed, around transferable skills and graduate attributes. It is the tension between these that interests me.

But I would like to raise a question, in conclusion. Recent trends in HE policy, which are all about promoting social mobility and particular ideas about meritocracy (promoted through the employability agenda), are very much in line with the theories that Bernstein associates with the new middle class, as an 'interrupter system' which changes the form of cultural reproduction while retaining its privileges.

Thinking about this in the context of generations, what we seem to have at work here is a restless attempt to interrupt the generational transmission of knowledge – both formal knowledge, and the 'unconscious data' described by Mannheim – through presenting the purpose of the university in terms of socialisation and employability.

This process seeks to detach students from their academic mentors, through the perceived irrelevance of subject content; and from the accumulated cultural heritage they have gleaned implicitly, from their families – by demanding that they go to university to skill themselves from the modern world.

In this context, the work of an 'interrupter system' can become *disruptive*, as it challenges a reaction against the transmission of knowledge among those who have yet to learn. In terms of class – weakly classified and framed skills that the middle class will be more adept at mobilising.