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Employability, Knowledge and the Creative Arts: Reflections from an Ethnographic Study of NEET Young People on an Entry to Employment Programme

Original Citation

Abstract

Abstract

This paper draws on research into the experiences of young people classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training) on an employability programme in the north of England, and uses Basil Bernstein's work on pedagogic discourses to explore how the creative arts can be used to re-engage them in work-related learning. Whilst creating demand for young people's labour is central to tackling youth unemployment, the paper contends that using the arts can go some way towards breaking down barriers to learning experienced by many marginalised young people, and argues that creative activities can be used to introduce them to forms of knowledge which have been largely flushed out of vocational education – at least for many working-class learners. The paper presents ethnographic data which suggests that skilful, well-informed tutors can, at least in some circumstances, use the creative arts to provide young people with access to forms of learning which transcend official discourses of employability, and introduce marginalised youth to forms of learning rooted in what Bernstein described as 'powerful knowledge'.

Keywords: NEET, employability training, ethnography, E2E, Bernstein

Introduction

This paper is based on research into the experiences of young people taking part in an employability programme in the north of England, and uses Bernstein's (2000 Bernstein, B. 2000. Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique. (revised ed.) Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. [Google Scholar]) work on pedagogic discourses to explore how creative arts can be used to re-engage marginalised youth in work-based learning. Whilst creating demand for young people's labour is central to tackling youth unemployment, the paper contends that using the arts can go some way towards breaking down barriers to learning experienced by many marginalised young people, and argues that creative activities can be used to introduce them to forms of knowledge which have been largely flushed out of vocational education – at least for many working-class learners. This, as we will see, is no easy task, not least because teaching staff themselves need the skills, knowledge and motivation to be able to navigate the constraints of the employability agenda, and use the creative arts in ways which both engage and empower marginalised young people.

The paper begins by summarising some of the key features of the changing nature of youth transitions which have taken place in the UK since the 1970s, and locates the rise of employability programmes for young people categorised as NEET (not in education, employment or training) – or at risk of becoming NEET – in their broader social and economic context. It also introduces some of Bernstein's ideas which will be used later in the paper. The next section provides an overview of Entry to Employment (E2E), the training programme which was the subject of the research upon which the paper is based. This is followed by the presentation of data from ethnographic research carried out on E2E programmes in the north of England, which is used to illustrate how the creative arts can potentially engage marginalised young people in forms of learning from which they might otherwise be excluded. The paper then returns to Bernstein to consider some of the strengths and limitations of particular approaches to teaching and learning, especially for those working with marginalised youth. But it concludes by arguing that there needs to be an attendant programme of job creation if policymakers are serious about improving the prospects of NEET young people – however robust or well delivered any form of education or training might be.

Youth transitions and the rise of employability programmes in the UK

For three decades after the end of the Second World War the vast majority of young people in the UK left school and entered full-time work at the earliest opportunity. There was often pressure from family and friends to leave education and get a job as soon as possible, and although pockets of unemployment existed in some parts of the country, most school-leavers found employment consistent with their ambitions and expectations (Goodwin and O'Connor 2005 Goodwin, J., and H. O'Connor. 2005. "Exploring Complex Transitions: Looking Back at the 'Golden Age' of Youth Transitions." Sociology 39 (2): 201–220.10.1177/0038038505050535[CrossRef], [Google Scholar], 214). For the majority, leaving home, marriage and parenthood took place in rapid sequence soon thereafter (Jones 1995 Jones, G. 1995. Leaving Home. Milton Keynes: Open University Press. [Google Scholar]). A small minority of mainly middle-class young people went on to higher education, but lengthy periods at college or university were quite rare amongst working-class youth. For young men especially, school-to-work transitions were often both speedy and collective, and the mass transfer of boys into local industry was a significant feature of the post-war labour market – although women also were an important part of the workforce in many sectors. Either way, employment alongside older workers offered youth a certain moral framework, and patterns of family, work and leisure were often intertwined with local labour markets (Simmons, Thompson, and Russell 2014 Simmons, R., R. Thompson, and L. Russell. 2014. Social Change, Work and Education: Young People and Marginalisation in Post-Industrial Britain. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.10.1057/9781137335944[CrossRef], [Google Scholar], 39–40). We must, however, be careful not to romanticise youth transitions in post-war Britain. Although the world of work offered young people a degree of stability and continuity which is largely absent today, factory life in particular was often dull and deeply alienating (Beynon 1973 Beynon, H. 1973. Working for Ford. London: Allen Lane. [Google Scholar]), and arguably working-class communities were characterised by parochialism and oppression as much as solidarity and support (see, for example, Dennis, Henriques, and Slaughter 1956 Dennis, N., F. Henriques, and C. Slaughter. 1956. Coal is Our Life: An Analysis of a Yorkshire Mining Community. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode. [Google Scholar]). It is also important to recognise that not all young people made smooth transitions into employment. Certain individuals 'churned' chronically from job-to-job and generally struggled to settle into the world of work, although the ready availability of employment often masked such processes (Finn 1987 Finn, D. 1987. Training without Jobs. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. [Google Scholar]). Either way, nowadays, for most young people, the journey into adulthood is far more complex and extended than was the case for previous generations. Few enter full-time work immediately after leaving school, and secure employment has become difficult to obtain, not only for those with few qualifications. Social structures appear less sure and predictable and, for many young people, access to the traditional signifiers of adult life has become disordered or suspended, sometimes almost indefinitely (Ainley and Allen 2010 Ainley, P., and M. Allen. 2010. Lost Generation? New Strategies for Youth and Education. London: Continuum. [Google Scholar]).

The changing nature of youth transitions is related in significant part to the collapse of the UK's traditional industrial base and the demise of a separate and identifiable youth labour market, which has taken place since the end of the 1970s. Yet, despite this, official discourse often explains youth unemployment in largely individualistic terms, and NEET young people are frequently accused of lacking the aptitudes and abilities necessary to find and sustain work (Simmons and Thompson 2011 Simmons, R., and R. Thompson. 2011. NEET Young People and Training for Work: Learning on the Margins. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham. [Google Scholar]). Consequently successive governments, in the UK and elsewhere (see, for example, Higgins 2013 Higgins, J. 2013. "Towards a Learning Identity: Young People Becoming Learners after Leaving School." Research in Post Compulsory Education 18 (1–2): 175–193.10.1080/13596748.2013.755860[Taylor & Francis

Online], [Google Scholar]; Smyth, McInerney, and Fish 2013 Smyth, J., P. McInerney, and T. Fish. 2013. "Re-Engagement to Where? Low SES Students in Alternative-Education Programmes on the Path to Low-Status Destinations?" Research in Post Compulsory Education 18 (1–2): 194–207.10.1080/13596748.2013.755862[Taylor & Francis Online], [Google Scholar]), have encouraged the expansion of various forms of education and training, and there has been a mushrooming of provision which purports to improve young people's employability skills (Maguire 2013 Maguire, S. 2013. "Will Raising the Participation Age in England Solve the NEET Problem?" Research in Post-Compulsory Education 18 (1–2): 61–76.10.1080/13596748.2013.755816[Taylor & Francis Online], [Google Scholar]). Participation in education and training is, however, sharply differentiated according to social class, gender and other forms of inequality and, whilst continued academic learning or general vocational education has become the norm for most young people, those on the margins of education and work are increasingly earmarked for so-called work-related learning, such as E2E (Simmons 2009 Simmons, R. 2009. "Entry to Employment: Discourses of Exclusion in Work-Based Learning for Young People." Journal of Education and Work 22 (2): 137–151.10.1080/13639080902854060[Taylor & Francis Online], [Google Scholar]).

Concerns about human capital, workforce skills and the like have a long history, especially in England (Musgrave 1970 Musgrave, P. 1970. "The Definition of Technical Education." In Sociology, History and Education, edited by P. Musgrave, 1860–1910. London: Methuen. [Google Scholar], 144). But such matters came to a head amid the repeated economic crises of the 1970s and various claims about falling educational standards made, for example, by the notorious Black Papers, via populist derision of left-wing teachers, criticism of so-called progressive teaching methods, and so forth. James Callaghan's (1976 Callaghan, J. 1976. Towards a National Debate, Speech given at Ruskin College, Oxford, 18th October. [Google Scholar]) (in)famous 'Great Debate' speech then blamed the education system for failing to produce young people with the skills and abilities demanded by industry and commerce, and there was thereafter an increasing emphasis on supply-side initiatives which, it was claimed, would provide a solution to the skills shortages presented as the cause of youth unemployment and Britain's relative economic decline more broadly (Ainley 2007 Ainley, P. 2007. "Across the Great Divide. From a Welfare State to a New Market State: The Case of VET." Journal of Vocational Education and Training 59 (3): 369–384.[Taylor & Francis Online], [Google Scholar]). The first of these, introduced in 1978, was the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) and, although there have, over time, been different emphases, today's employability programmes have much in common with YOP and various initiatives which succeeded it during the 1980s and 1990s, inasmuch as they all tend to assume the causes of youth unemployment are located primarily within the individual rather than the nature of the labour market. The replacement in official discourse of the collective concept of youth unemployment with NEET, a category based upon a range of technical and moral judgements about young people's non-participation, is perhaps emblematic of this shift (Simmons and Thompson 2011 Simmons, R., and R. Thompson. 2011. NEET Young People and Training for Work: Learning on the Margins. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham. [Google Scholar], 41–42).

Entry to Employment was introduced following the 2001 Cassels Report as a training programme intended for young people deemed 'not yet ready' to enter employment, an apprenticeship, or other forms of further education. The content of the programme varied from provider to provider, but the E2E curriculum was intended to provide learning across three main dimensions: basic skills, personal and social development, and vocational skills (LSC 2006 LSC (Learning and Skills Council). 2006. The Framework for Entry to Employment Programmes. Coventry: LSC. [Google Scholar]). Here it is helpful to introduce Bernstein's work on pedagogic discourses as, according to Wheelahan (2007 Wheelahan, L. 2007. "How Competency-Based Training Locks the Working

Class out of Powerful Knowledge: A Modified Bernsteinian Analysis." British Journal of Sociology of Education 28 (5): 637–651.10.1080/01425690701505540[Taylor & Francis Online], [Web of Science ®], [Google Scholar]), Bernstein's (2000 Bernstein, B. 2000. Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique. (revised ed.) Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. [Google Scholar]) ideas can explain how different curricula are associated not only with varying levels of status and prestige, but how different learners are allowed access to different forms of knowledge which carry differing degrees of explanatory power. These ideas, I argue, can be used to examine the changing nature of the vocational curriculum and to critique the contemporary nature of employability programmes in particular.

There has, according to Bernstein (1999 Bernstein, B. 1999. "Vertical and Horizontal Discourse: An Essay." British Journal of Sociology of Education 20 (2): 157–173.10.1080/01425699995380[Taylor & Francis Online], [Web of Science ®], [Google Scholar]), been an increasing incursion of the state into educational policy and practice, at least since the 1970s, which, he contends, has resulted – especially for many working-class students – in the replacement of what he describes as singular and regional pedagogic discourses with more generic discourses of knowledge. Or, in other words, Bernstein contends that much principled, conceptual knowledge has been stripped out of vocational education and replaced by more mundane 'everyday' conceptions of learning. Bernstein argues that such processes can be seen in the movement away from a vocational curriculum underpinned by subjects such as mathematics, economics, chemistry (singular modes of knowledge) or various combinations of the natural or social sciences (regional modes), and the rise of alternative forms learning based largely upon inculcating young people with the ability to engage, on an ongoing basis, in 'the acquisition of generic modes which it is hoped will realise a flexible transferable potential rather than specific performances' (Bernstein 2000 Bernstein, B. 2000. Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique. (revised ed.) Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. [Google Scholar], 59). Arguably, such trends are particularly evident on employability programmes, such as E2E (Simmons 2009 Simmons, R. 2009. "Entry to Employment: Discourses of Exclusion in Work-Based Learning for Young People." Journal of Education and Work 22 (2): 137–151.10.1080/13639080902854060[Taylor & Francis Online], [Google Scholar]) and, according to Bernstein, deeply problematic in many ways – not least because a vocational curriculum emptied of principled, conceptual knowledge is, he argues, limiting both socially and educationally, especially for working-class students (Bernstein 2000 Bernstein, B. 2000. Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique. (revised ed.) Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. [Google Scholar]).

Researching training for NEET young people: Entry to Employment

The fieldwork discussed in this paper was conducted in two neighbouring local authorities in the north of England: 'Middlebridge' and 'Greenford'. Middlebridge has a population of approximately 400,000 and comprises two large post-industrial towns, and a number of smaller towns and villages; Greenford is centred on one major town and its satellites, and has a population of approximately 200,000. In Middlebridge, white British people constitute just under 80% of the population, with the largest minority ethnic groups being Asian, of Pakistani or Indian descent. Greenford has a somewhat smaller ethnic minority population, 10% being non-white, mainly of Pakistani heritage. The history of both authorities has been influenced by textiles, engineering and other forms of manufacturing, although, over time, much of the traditional industrial base has withered and, like the rest of the UK, most employment is now in service sector, centred upon mental and emotional labour. Manufacturing nevertheless still provides significant employment in both places and accounted for around 20% of the workforce at the time of the research.

Phase one of the research mapped the pattern of E2E provision, which operated as a partnership across the two local authorities, led by Middlebridge College, and included a range of private and voluntary sector providers. Although state funded, Entry to Employment, like most other employability programmes, was delivered by various public, private and voluntary sector organisations, and the nature and quality of provision varied significantly from provider to provider. Large numbers of young people nevertheless took part in E2E. When the research upon which this paper is based began in November 2008, approximately 20,600 16- to 18-year-olds were enrolled on Entry to Employment courses across England (DCSF 2009 DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families). 2009. Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 Year Olds in England, Statistical First Release SFR 12/2009, detailed participation numbers (Excel spreadsheet). Accessed December 3 2009. http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000849/index.shtml [Google Scholar]), and during 2008–09 a total of 77,300 learners participated in E2E (Data Service 2009 Data Service. 2009. Post-16 Education and Skills: Learner Participation, Outcomes and Level of Highest Qualification Held. Statistical First Release DS/SFR4. Coventry: The Data Service. [Google Scholar], 22). Phase two involved an ethnographic investigation of four case-study sites from across the partnership. Fieldwork commenced in November 2008 and ended in May 2009. It included 87 hours of observations and 58 tape-recorded and transcribed interviews (plus five unrecorded interviews) with E2E learners and tutors, provision managers, and Connexions11. Connexions was the integrated information, advice and guidance service set up under Tony Blair's Labour Government which operated across England until its replacement by the National Careers Service in 2012.View all notes Personal Advisers. Field notes and photographs documented the learning environment, use of space and time, learner behaviour and relations with staff, and a range of teaching and learning activities. The nature of the learners taking part in the research, many of who had negative experiences of compulsory education or disrupted schooling, meant that ethnographic methods were necessary to gain as full a picture as possible of the nature of the learner experience. Whilst many of the young people expressed themselves well, some – particularly the young men – were more reticent and reliance on interviews alone would have limited findings considerably. Although research was carried out at four learning sites, partly for brevity, the data presented came from fieldwork carried out only at Middlebridge College.

Spielhofer, Mann, and Sims (2003 Spielhofer, T., P. Mann, and D. Sims. 2003. Entry to Employment (E2E) Participant Study. London: LSDA. [Google Scholar], 12–14) describe E2E participants as comprising three overlapping categories of young people: those with low levels of educational attainment; individuals with difficult personal circumstances; and the disengaged or socially marginal. The first category includes those with few or no qualifications and young people with special needs, including learning disabilities. The second group contains young offenders and those with alcohol, drug or behavioural problems. The final category includes young people with a history of non-participation, those lacking in confidence, and others facing 'barriers to progression' such as early parenthood or caring responsibilities. Many of the young people who participated in the research had significant barriers to learning and the practitioners we interviewed recognised this.

It could be from families that have gone off the rails; it could be from sink estates; it could be from kids in care; it could be from youth offending; it could be young people who simply haven't got an idea of what they want to do with the next stage of their lives.

(Partnership manager, interview)

Well, a lot of them come along with personal and social development issues because they are estranged from family and they have mental health issues and alcohol, and all stuff like that. (Connexions PA, interview)

The vast majority have underperformed in terms of education ... a substantial number have dyslexia … ADHD and some of the behavioural problems. They're a vulnerable group although they are extremely diverse ... They've got pretty low self-esteem even if they come across as tough and aggressive ... that's just part of the armour they wear.

(E2E tutor, interview)

The NEET category is made up of a diverse range of individuals with a wide range of backgrounds, circumstances and ambitions (DCSF [Department for Children, Schools and Families] 2008 DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families). 2008. Reducing the Number of Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET): the Strategy. Nottingham: DCSF Publications. [Google Scholar]; Coles et al. 2002 Coles, B., S. Hutton, J. Bradshaw, G. Craig, C. Godfrey, and J. Johnson. 2002. Literature Review of the Costs of Being 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' at Age 16–18. Norwich: HMSO. [Google Scholar]), but being NEET for lengthy periods is nevertheless usually related to disadvantage. Care leavers, young offenders and young people with special needs are, for example, disproportionately likely to become and remain NEET for extended periods, and those from poor socio-economic backgrounds are significantly over-represented in the NEET category. Spending significant amounts of time outside education and work can also have various 'scarring effects' and early experience of being NEET is often associated with sustained disadvantage including social isolation, poor health and long-term adult unemployment, as well as low pay and job insecurity when in work (Coles et al. 2010 Coles, B., C. Godfrey, A. Keung, S. Parrott, and J. Bradshaw. 2010. Estimating the Life-Time Cost of NEET: 16–18 Year Olds Not in Education, Employment or Training. York: University of York. [Google Scholar]).Almost half the 53 young people who participated in the study lived in one-parent households and many had experienced difficult circumstances, including domestic violence, youth offending, illness and learning disabilities. More than half had spent significant periods of time outside education and employment; many reported negative experiences of schooling, and one-third had effectively ceased attending before reaching the minimum leaving age of 16. Many participants had been excluded from school, whilst others truanted because of disaffection or bullying. Most had joined E2E via Connexions, although it should be noted that young people's participation in employability programmes is often about a lack of alternatives rather than being a proactive choice.

I used to go to school but then skive lessons ... Just to fit in with my friends really ... I moved out [of the family home] and I were a dosser for a couple of years and then I came here but then left because I couldn't settle. I never used to turn in and stuff ... then I got kicked off the course ... There was too much going on with my boyfriend and I were coming in with a black eye ... But then I came back and re-applied...

(Ruth E2E learner, interview)

Missed application or enrolment deadlines for other courses were cited by several learners as a reason for joining E2E, and generally the impression was that other options had either been exhausted or were unobtainable, at least for the foreseeable future. Although, in some instances, this could indicate a lack of cultural and social capital in terms of understanding the processes of post-compulsory education, wider cultural factors may also be involved, as with one young woman who was visiting relatives in Pakistan at college enrolment time. In some ways, however, certain

participants did not conform to stereotypes about E2E learners or NEET young people more generally. Virtually all those who took part in the research had tangible aspirations in terms of employment or further education; some aimed ultimately at professional occupations, and several participants had siblings at university or in work. Although a quarter of participants had no GCSE passes, nearly half had at least one GCSE at grade C or above and not all were of low academic ability.

We've had some with seven A–C GCSEs. It could be someone who has dropped out of the sixth form because they don't like it or they've had a life crisis and they need time to readjust, and there is nowhere else to go. We've got someone starting now who has had enough of sixth form ... having a change of tack.

(E2E tutor, interview)

Forty-three of the young people came from a household with at least one adult in employment. Parental occupations included factory worker, supermarket assistant, cleaner, lorry driver, bottle-packer and care assistant – although some higher-status occupations were also reported, including schoolteacher and accounts clerk, together with self-employment in industries such as construction and leisure. Of the ten participants from workless households, one lived with retired grandparents, one with a lone parent on maternity leave, two had parents recently made redundant, and one had a lone parent whose caring responsibilities prevented her from working. Far from being drawn from a feckless underclass with an antipathy to education and work, evidence actually suggests that the participants were not greatly different from working-class learners in general.

Creative arts and learning for employability

Young people who appear to reject schooling are often constructed as unsuited to the mainstream curriculum and to require alternative provision – usually either located away from the school or in specialist units within it – and there is little doubt that all our case study sites offered a rather different environment to those found in more conventional educational settings. In some cases, E2E providers were located in rather shabby parts of town and based in converted industrial or commercial premises with few, if any, green spaces. Classrooms and workshops tended to be a little dog-eared and generally dated. Although Entry to Employment was part of a large educational institution at Middlebridge College, there was a large degree of separation from other provision. The E2E office and classrooms were located in a run-down part of the college, and learners used a back door opening onto the street rather than the main entrance to the building. It would be fair to say this reflected the programme's relatively low status within the institution and illustrates the somewhat marginal status of employability programmes more generally.

The workshop is a short walk from the office … Gareth [E2E tutor] realised it wasn't being used so thought he'd put the resources to good use … Gareth would like to expand … by adding areas where young people can learn to wallpaper, paint and do electrical skills. He fears that under the 'new build' plans this space will disappear.

(Researcher field notes)

Much can be learned by focusing on the social interactions through which learning takes place. Drawing on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, James and Biesta (2007 James, D., and G. Biesta. 2007. Improving Learning Cultures in Further Education. London: Routledge. [Google Scholar]) argue that the cultural context of learning is more than just a backdrop to educational experiences, and that learning is a cultural phenomenon in its own right. A learning culture is, they suggest,

constituted by 'the social practices through which people learn' and in which the actions, dispositions and interpretations of participants are closely interwoven (James and Biesta 2007 James, D., and G. Biesta. 2007. Improving Learning Cultures in Further Education. London: Routledge. [Google Scholar], 23). As highlighted earlier, young people attending employability programmes are diverse in their needs and abilities, and most of the E2E tutors encountered during the course of the research recognised this. There was nevertheless a tendency to assume that a practical 'hands-on' approach was preferable to more formal modes of pedagogy. Another aspect of the learning culture centred upon 'moving on' from earlier failure, and tutors often identified a number of characteristics which they encountered when working with E2E learners, including poor basic skills; emotional and behavioural problems; and low levels of confidence, self-esteem and motivation. Visual displays told stories of what could be achieved through E2E, and presented particular forms of employment to which learners could aspire. Individualised target-setting and regular progress reviews were used to encourage young people to celebrate their achievements and look ahead to further successes. Although time-consuming, generally tutors saw such processes as part of the intensive personal support necessary for E2E learners.

For the E2E tutors, teaching was usually a second or subsequent career and there was substantial evidence of what Gleeson, Davies and Wheeler (2005 Gleeson, D., J. Davies, and E. Wheeler. 2005. "On the Making and Taking of Professionalism in the Further Education Workplace." British Journal of Sociology of Education 26 (4): 445–460.[Taylor & Francis Online], [Web of Science ®], [Google Scholar]) describe as 'sliding' into the job.

I did bits here and there but nothing that would be a long-term career. I ended up on New Deal [and] when I was working on my CV, I was approached by a tutor who said there was a job going at Connexions ... I was there for about two and a half years and ... I've been here since ... I came on the admin side and I was the receptionist here and within six months I had the opportunity to work on the E2E programme.

(E2E tutor, interview)

The background and qualifications of teaching staff varied substantially, and many of the younger tutors expressed a desire to work in more 'mainstream' forms of further education. Most did not have teaching qualifications before working on E2E, although many had subsequently gained or were undertaking various forms of 'in-service' teacher training, some through the local university. Either way, most E2E tutors did not regard themselves as teachers per se. Although no unified alternative conception was evident, many talked about the importance of pastoral guidance, and discourses of nurture, care and support were common. Generally, E2E tutors regarded themselves as assemblers of solutions or, in some cases, as 'trouble shooters' rather than teachers, trainers or lecturers.

The notion of employability central to E2E and similar employability programmes assumes the necessity of re-forming attitudes and dispositions believed to be inimical to employment (Simmons 2009 Simmons, R. 2009. "Entry to Employment: Discourses of Exclusion in Work-Based Learning for Young People." Journal of Education and Work 22 (2): 137–151.10.1080/13639080902854060[Taylor & Francis Online], [Google Scholar]), and so much of the tutors' work focused on developing attributes such as punctuality, a conventional personal appearance, and building interpersonal skills – or, in other words, teaching and learning on E2E, and the nature of knowledge and skills imparted, largely reflected Bernstein's generic mode of knowledge. The need for punctuality was stressed and routines such as cleaning and tidying-up after practical activities were more or less consistently enforced – although usually without using

formal sanctions. Whilst traditional classroom-based teaching and learning activities sometimes took place, providers often used sport, outdoor pursuits and similar activities as a vehicle to build a range of skills and intellectual abilities – and, in some cases, this opened up access to more traditional forms of conceptual knowledge. Others used arts, crafts and other creative activities in ways which it is argued offered E2E learners a degree of engagement with regional and singular modes of knowledge, or at least the prospect of gaining access to such forms of learning in future.

The field notes below illustrate some of the learning experiences encountered at Middlebridge College. The first deals with young people designing greetings cards to be sold at a Christmas fair, and shows how, with skilful tutoring, creative activities can be used to build a range of vocational and social skills. In this case, participants were encouraged to improve their (generic) interpersonal skills and taught to work with various materials to produce artefacts, and so forth. But the data also reveals how the tutor was able to use creative activities to engage young people with English, mathematics and other forms of learning which many E2E learners may otherwise have been resistant to.

10.00 am. Jane, the tutor, shows the group two cards she made earlier, the lads can't believe she made them herself. Jane asks how much they would pay for them. Some learners say £1, others 75p or £1.25. Jane explains that they need to make 50 cards to sell. Today they need to produce ideas. Some of the learners move to the computers while others remain at their desks. Jane makes her way around the classroom, she asks, 'What's your idea, Dom?' He says, 'I don't know, but I like to do my own ideas'. Jane says this is fine.

10.15 am. Jane asks what might go on a Christmas card. Some of the learners shout out ideas and Jane writes them on the whiteboard: a Christmas tree, sleighs, Santa, reindeer … Jane says, 'Well, it looks like we've got some good ideas.' Lewis is busy cutting out stencils, he asks, 'Does it 'ave to be perfect?' – Jane says no. Ben suggests, 'Why don't we sell them on this website?', he has found one that sells cards at £23 for ten. Jane asks, 'Well, how much is that each? Ben tries to work it out on a piece of paper – Jane walks over to him and leans over the desks to see how he is working it out, she says, 'Do you want me to show you an easier way to do it?', and then shows him.

10.20 am. Jane tries to motivate the learners by saying that the profit will go towards their day out. One lad asks, 'Is this a practice?' Jane says, 'Yes, why do you think we're doing that?' and he responds, 'So we don't fuck it up'. Jane says, 'So we don't mess it up, yeah.' She explains that the materials cost £40 so they need to be careful. The phone goes and Jane leaves the room to answer it. While she is absent, the class functions well. Two lads discuss the price of Christmas cards, another plays games on the computer. Jodie continues gluing ... One lad uses the guillotine to cut some coloured paper. Ben and Dom are researching card designs using Google.

10.28 am. Jane returns and asks McCauley to do some work. (McCauley has recently been involved in a serious car accident ... Jane later explains that he has been granted more time on E2E as he suffers with short-term memory loss, struggles to complete tasks, and is much slower than some of the other learners). She says that they have had half an hour to do research and must now start work on their card designs. Jane helps Ben decide how to do his reindeer template. Ben says, 'I don't get it!' Jane explains that his reindeer image is quite complex and might be difficult, so she diverts his attention back to the whiteboard to see what might be an easier image...

10.40 am. Jane sees what Danny is up to, she says he might want to use a different colour for his design, Danny jokes, 'That's racist!' Jane asks him what 'racist' means and he says he doesn't know. Ben asks why Black people can call each other 'niggers' and White people can't, and Jane

says that certain terms can be thought of as racist in different contexts. She explains that they should be mindful of other people's feelings. The discussion turns to 'Christmas' and whether we should continue to use that name ... Jane reminds them about the word 'goon', she asks if they remember its meaning (they have obviously talked about this before). One learner says it means a stupid person and Jodie says her mum calls her a goon. Jane says this might be interpreted as offensive language in the classroom…

11.40 am. The group tidy away for lunch. Danny clears his cuttings from the floor and Ben rolls his paper into a ball and launches it into the bin held high by Danny. Jane threatens them saying they must adhere to health and safety rules otherwise she will devote a whole day to reminding them what they are...'

During the break one of the tutors, David, shows me a metal dragon made by one of the learners, which is very impressive. He says the learners have sold such dragons on eBay. There is a wall that separates a classroom learning space from the messy work area full of paint, work benches and materials. The wall is covered in cartoon images of young people dressed in designer clothes. David explains how one of the learners did the artwork; and how he had poor literacy and numeracy but was very skilful with a paintbrush. David says the learner was offered a job from one of his placements. He says there are some success stories, but that there can be significant difficulty in finding placements. Many businesses have gone bust and [others] can't risk having a young person damage their reputation.

(Researcher field notes)

The next extract is from a vocational skills session which took place in the formerly disused workshop at Middlebridge College mentioned earlier in the paper – and again illustrates how creative activities can be used to expose young people to principled, conceptual knowledge, rather than simply being employed to forge certain dispositions or forms of behaviour.

1.15 pm. The group have been told to make a car measured to specification. The measurements and design are on the blackboard.

I look through Kyle's portfolio; it includes health and safety regulations, design ideas and costing. Clearly a lot of work has gone into this. Chris cuts out wood for his wheel. Adam glues on his wheels.

Kyle seems to get frustrated, he gets out his pieces of wood but doesn't want to glue them together as suggested. He says he doesn't trust the glue, but Frank [the tutor] says to trust him. Gareth [another tutor] gets a wooden case made by a [former learner] and asks him to pull it apart using 'reasonable force'. Kyle refuses but Chris says he'll have a go; he cannot break it demonstrating the strength of the glue. Gareth later tells me that Kyle gets so far and then gives up but explains that he has made some progress today.

All the learners will race their cars down a ramp. Frank has made a car too. He comments on how amazing wood is, 'Look at what you can do with a block of wood'.

2.15 pm. Jack chisels, Chris paints his wheels, Leon is waiting for some glue to dry while eating sweets ... Adam has finished his car and test-runs it down the work bench. Gareth gets another learner's car and Frank gets his to compare.

The learners have a break.

2.25 pm. When they return Chris, Adam and Gareth make a ramp by hanging a piece of wood from a chair to test their car's speed.

Just before 3.00 pm the learners clear up ready to go home. They need to be persuaded to wipe the work benches; Gareth says they won't leave until the work areas are clear. They clean them eventually.

(Researcher field notes)

Here, Kyle's portfolio provides the opportunity to introduce subjects such as law and English language, and to engage with various aspects of applied mathematics. The other activities reported above potentially open up the study of physics and mechanics through, for example, the principles of mass, velocity, momentum and so forth. But here there are sobering realities to grasp. The ability of the tutor to engage young people in such learning is dependent, not only on being able to motivate and build positive relations with certain individuals and groups, but also requires both an adequate grasp of such forms of knowledge and the wherewithal to explain them in an accessible fashion to young people who might otherwise be resistant to learning. This, in turn, presents significant questions about the recruitment, retention and general profile of those responsible for delivering work-related learning, and the pay, conditions and career development opportunities available to them.

Analysis and discussion

The data reported in this paper show that employability programmes contain a number of features of what Bernstein (1971 Bernstein, B. 1971. "On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge." In Knowledge and Control: New Directions in the Sociology of Education, edited by M. F. D. Young, 47–69. London: Collier-Macmillan. [Google Scholar]) called an integrated code of pedagogy, with much content rooted in notions of employability and personal development. But a particular feature of E2E was the readiness of tutors to exploit the permeable boundaries between the three core curriculum areas, for example by taking opportunities to embed literacy and numeracy into creative learning sessions or by discussing issues raised by the use of discriminatory language. 'Framing' or, in other words, the degree of visible teacher control over the pedagogic environment (Bernstein 1971 Bernstein, B. 1971. "On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge." In Knowledge and Control: New Directions in the Sociology of Education, edited by M. F. D. Young, 47–69. London: Collier-Macmillan. [Google Scholar]) tended to be relatively weak, with quite relaxed rules and regulations. However, as Bernstein explains, framing is about visible rather than actual control, and the extracts above show that the regulation of time, behaviour and assessment was perhaps only superficially different from other spheres of education. Nevertheless, the amount of visible teacher control over pacing, selection of content and other aspects of the learning environment was relatively low. 'Waiting for them to come to you' and 'working at the learners' own pace' featured strongly in discussions about pedagogy. Informality was the norm, and most of the young people who took part in the research claimed to get on well with staff, which was contrasted with more negative experiences of school.

[I]t's not like a tech because tech is all, like, lectures but you can sort of chill out and take your time and you don't have to get this done by so and so like you do at school ... The staff you can get along with. They let you do as much as you can and they'll let you get away with so much, so you know what I mean?

(Ruth E2E learner, interview)

In terms of content, many aspects of E2E exemplify Bernstein's (2000 Bernstein, B. 2000. Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique. (revised ed.) Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. [Google Scholar]) generic mode of pedagogic discourse. There was, for example, a significant emphasis upon CV building, interview techniques and other 'transferable skills' thought necessary to secure and maintain employment. Such matters are not unimportant: much employment requires a range of 'soft skills', and a caring and nurturing approach is often quite valid with young people who have previously had negative experiences of education (Hyland 2009 Hyland, T. 2009. "Mindfulness and the Therapeutic Function of Education." Journal of Philosophy of Education 43 (1): 119–131.10.1111/jope.2009.43.issue-1[CrossRef], [Web of Science ®], [Google Scholar]). However, when such skills are taught in isolation from the social practices in which they are normally embedded, the danger is that they merely serve 'to reproduce imaginary conditions of work and life which abstract such experiences from the power relations of their lived conditions and negate the possibilities of understanding and criticism' (Bernstein 2000 Bernstein, B. 2000. Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique. (revised ed.) Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. [Google Scholar], 59). Or, more bluntly, whilst constructing a CV is not in itself without value there are only so many times a young person can update a résumé before coherent knowledge and skills need to be gained in order to add substance to such a document (Simmons and Thompson 2011 Simmons, R., and R. Thompson. 2011. NEET Young People and Training for Work: Learning on the Margins. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham. [Google Scholar], 171). This is no easy task but the field notes above show how tutors can, at least in some cases, use the creative arts to provide a more holistic approach to training, drawing on real vocational and social issues to contextualise knowledge, and provide meaningful learning experiences.

Bernstein (1999 Bernstein, B. 1999. "Vertical and Horizontal Discourse: An Essay." British Journal of Sociology of Education 20 (2): 157–173.10.1080/01425699995380[Taylor & Francis Online], [Web of Science ®], [Google Scholar]) argues that principled, conceptual knowledge constitutes a vertical discourse of knowledge – or that it provides access to an explanatory power which everyday knowledge is simply not able to provide. For him, the 'discursive gap' between everyday situations and the theoretical concepts and general principles contained within vertical discourses provide 'the crucial site of the yet to be thought' (Bernstein 2000 Bernstein, B. 2000. Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique. (revised ed.) Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. [Google Scholar], 31). This, for Bernstein, is the place where powerful, perhaps dangerously powerful, knowledge is produced. In contrast, Bernstein argues that generic modes of pedagogy represent a horizontal discourse – where learning is directed towards immediate goals and connected to the notion of trainability whereby the individual will supposedly accrue various transferable skills, through which it is assumed they will be able to continuously re-engage with the constantly changing circumstances of work and employment. Such notions are popular amongst many policymakers, and business groups often criticise young people for the lacking basic skills and personal qualities they require to be employable (see, for example, CBI [Confederation of British Industry]/Pearson 2015 CBI (Confederation of British Industry)/Pearson. 2015. Inspiring Growth: CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey, 2015. London: CBI/Pearson. [Google Scholar]). For Bernstein (2000 Bernstein, B. 2000. Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique. (revised ed.) Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. [Google Scholar], 59), however, ascribing what are essentially social processes to the individual fundamentally denies 'the dynamic interface between individual careers and the social or collective base', and effectively places a socially empty concept at the centre of education (Thompson 2009 Thompson, R. 2009. "Creativity." Knowledge and Curriculum in Further Education: A Bernsteinian Perspective British Journal of Educational Studies 57 (1): 37–54.[Taylor & Francis Online], [Web of Science

®], [Google Scholar], 48). By removing generic practices from their original contexts the power relations and inequalities inherent within work and life are excluded, and the possibility of understanding and critiquing such processes is removed. But, as Bernstein tells us, the promotion of particular forms of pedagogic identity is, after all, the outcome of struggle between different social groups, the outcome of which is projected by the state. The intention is that such identities become embodied in teachers and learners, creating 'a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices' (Bernstein 2000 Bernstein, B. 2000. Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique. (revised ed.) Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. [Google Scholar], 65). Such arguments are sobering but, then again, education for the working classes has always been about social control as much as emancipation (Lawton 1975 Lawton, D. 1975. Class, Culture and the Curriculum. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. [Google Scholar]).

Conclusion

There have, over time, been various initiatives which have attempted to cajole or coerce NEET young people into participation (Maguire 2013 Maguire, S. 2013. "Will Raising the Participation Age in England Solve the NEET Problem?" Research in Post-Compulsory Education 18 (1–2): 61–76.10.1080/13596748.2013.755816[Taylor & Francis Online], [Google Scholar]), and the great majority of learners on the E2E programmes which were the subject of this research appeared to be improving their literacy and numeracy skills, developing increased confidence, and gaining other valuable skills. But young people who, for whatever reason, do not acquire the knowledge, qualifications and personal capital attained by their peers will inevitably be disadvantaged in the labour market, and the ability of E2E and similar programmes to deliver employment, rather than employability, is constrained by the scarcity of work, competitive labour markets, and broader social inequalities (Simmons and Thompson 2011 Simmons, R., and R. Thompson. 2011. NEET Young People and Training for Work: Learning on the Margins. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham. [Google Scholar]). NEET youth are, moreover, vying for employment not only with each other and more highly qualified young people, but also against other sections of the population including women returners, economic migrants and older workers in general. Whilst much of the traditional youth labour market has, over the years, withered as a result of structural economic change, widespread unemployment and especially underemployment more generally has led to increased competition for the work that remains (Allen and Ainley 2013 Allen, M., and P. Ainley. 2013. The Great Reversal: Young People, Education and Employment in a Declining Economy. London: Radicaled. [Google Scholar]). It is important then to recognise that employability is related not only to an individual's capacity to undertake work in a particular sector, but that it must also be understood relative to the demand for labour and to competition from other potential employees (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003 Brown, P., A. Hesketh, and S. Williams. 2003. "Employability in a Knowledge-Driven Economy." Journal of Education and Work 16 (2): 107–126.[Taylor & Francis Online], [Google Scholar]). Young people on E2E and similar programmes are therefore likely to face a difficult journey if they are to secure stable employment and the other trappings of adult life they desire.

Employability programmes can nevertheless provide a valuable learning experience for some young people and the creative arts can offer a way to engage young people in practical and conceptual learning where other forms of pedagogy may prove less fruitful. Although the focus on transferable skills found on many employability programmes can be problematic if delivered in detached or unimaginative ways, the creative arts can open up opportunities for progressive practice. The extracts above show learners being 'stretched' and challenged, and demonstrate how the creative arts can be used not only to deliver practical, vocational skills but also to improve

learners' literacy, numeracy and communication skills, and promote social awareness. They also illustrate how young people can be introduced to forms of powerful knowledge that are increasingly reserved for the relatively privileged in British society. This, I argue, is necessary if NEET young people are to avoid competing only for low-skill, insecure employment, and to enable them to locate their experiences of work and society within a broader explanatory framework which enables them to develop as critically informed citizens, employers and consumers. But, whilst employability programmes can potentially play an important role in re-engaging marginalised young people, resolving youth unemployment also requires stimulation of the demand for young people's labour, and a contestation of the neo-liberal policies which exacerbate the barriers to employment faced by many. After all, as Basil Bernstein (1977 Bernstein, B. 1977. Class, Codes and Control, Vol. 3. Towards a Theory of Educational Transmission, 2nd ed. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. [Google Scholar]) reminds us, education cannot compensate for all society's ills.

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Notes

1. Connexions was the integrated information, advice and guidance service set up under Tony Blair's Labour Government which operated across England until its replacement by the National Careers Service in 2012.

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