

The emancipatory potential of community interaction in career education

Petra Røise

This article contributes to a further development of Bill Law's Community Interaction Theory (1981, 2009), by highlighting its emancipatory potential. Through an action research project with teachers, career counsellors and the article's author, collective knowledge was developed on career education in lower secondary schools in Norway, with particular focus on integrating career learning through work placement activities. Analysis show challenges in contributing to career education's liberating potential without sufficient insight into how to facilitate a reflective career learning process. The paper concludes that, to strengthen a focus on emancipation, career education needs to build on Community Interaction Theory by emphasising the collective, contextual, complex, and critical dimensions of career learning.



Introduction

For many decades, career learning activities have been facilitated between school and working life contexts as a part of career education. Bill Law's Community Interaction Theory draws attention to the importance of reflecting on interactions between contacts, cultures, and contexts, as a source of complexity in career education. As Law states 'because it is complexity which offers options, identifies causes and effects, and enables autonomy' (Law, 2004, p. 53). Hereby foreground significance is given to the emancipatory purpose of career education.

Such career learning activities between contexts are common practice in lower secondary schools in Norway, where career education is organised through an obligatory curricular subject called Educational

Choice [Utdanningsvalg], serving students aged 13 to 16. This article explores how qualitative research into career education in Norway can inform a further development of Community Interaction Theory. In line with Guichard (2001), I describe career education as facilitating career learning in collective processes in schools (Røise, 2020). These collective career learning processes need to be systematised through pedagogical facilitation, as stated by Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2009).

Whereas an earlier edition of the Norwegian curriculum has been identified embedded in a neoliberal rationale (Røise, 2020), such responsabilisation of the individual regarding their own education and employability, is still prominent in the current curriculum for Educational Choice. Here emphasis is placed on strengthening students' competence to deal with choices and transitions between educational trajectories and work contexts (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). Such trends towards responsabilisation and individualisation are also identified in a European context (Sultana, 2012).

Regarding the provision of Educational Choice, it turns out to be challenging to create meaningful activities in the subject (Mjaavatn & Frostad, 2018). Earlier research shows students prefer experienced-based approaches to career learning (Buland et al., 2014), but such activities are logistically demanding to organise as a part of a school day (Andreassen, 2011; Lødding & Holen, 2012). At the same time, international research from the students' perspective points out that authentic experiences with different work tasks and environments are important for the students' further choice of education and profession (Klindt Poulsen, 2020; Messer, 2017).

To deal with these challenges, drawing on critical emancipatory perspectives, this article elucidates how qualitative research in Norwegian career education can contribute to the further development of Bill Law's Community Interaction Theory. I will argue, that to counteract a neoliberal approach, and to strengthen a focus on emancipation and reflection, career education needs to build on a Community Interaction Theory that emphasises collective, contextual, complex, and critical career learning.

Community interaction as a source for emancipation

A main purpose for career education is to give students access to other parts of society than those accessible through their own upbringing. Since its introduction in 1981, Law's Community Interaction Theory has promoted the importance of career learning through engagement in and reflection on encounters between individuals and their communities. 'Community interaction is a 'mid-range' account of career management - it does not ignore big-picture social structures, neither does it dismiss inner-life, but it focuses on how the two interact' (Law, 1981, p. 6). When differentiating between career guidance and career curriculum, it is mainly curriculum that provides opportunity to engage in community interaction, i.e. through experience-based educational programmes such as work experience (Law, 1999). Tensions that arise in these interactions between school and the world of work, should, according to Law, not be ignored. Moreover, such tensions emphasise that a greater degree of complexity in career education is the key to more freedom - it opens more doors to a possible future (Law, 2004).

This emancipatory purpose of education can be elaborated through the work of the Brazilian liberation pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970b). Freire promoted liberating dialogue about social contexts to help people develop their subjectivity and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970a). '(...) my never accepting, yesterday or today, that educational practice should be restricted to a "reading of the word," a "reading of text", but rather believing that it should also include a "reading of context", a "reading of the world"'. (Freire,

1997, p. 12), Central in Freire's work is the connection between developing skills in school that are relevant in encounters with the outside world. Furthermore, applying Freire's critical approach to the context of career education would be to not accept a perception of students' role as solely to adapt to society, and not to present the social world and the world of work as unchangeable (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2008, p.p 32-33).

Freire's work contributes to raising awareness of emancipatory potential of career education, and the students' potential liberating actions and reflections related to career learning activities. To achieve such emancipation, a key task in career education is to give students a greater complexity of experiences and impressions to relate to, as a means to orient themselves towards future education, work, and life in general.

The current relevance of viewing Community Interaction Theory through an emancipatory lens can be seen in a movement in the field of career guidance and education, away from a technocratic view, towards a more dialogical, mutual relationship that can support critical awareness (Hooley et al., 2018, p. 20). From this movement arise collective approaches to developing meaningful career learning through involvement in the local community (Thomsen, 2017). This gives actualisation to putting Community Interaction Theory at the core of the research that is the background for this paper.

Methodology

The empirical studies which are the basis for this paper formed part of my PhD research into career education in lower secondary education in Norway. In Norway, compulsory education starts at age 6 and ends after 10th grade (age 16). Students can then apply to either vocational or upper-secondary education. The subject of Educational Choice is taught by teachers or career guidance counsellors at the schools, though no special competences are required to teach the subject. The subject has its own curriculum and consists of 110 hours, divided over the three years of lower secondary school.

The empirical study was conducted as an action research project at one school, entailing collaboration between five teachers and two career counsellors and the article's author, during the course of one school year. The aim of the project was to develop collective knowledge on the subject Educational Choice, with focus on career education related to work visits that lasted a week, and one-day work visits. Empirical data consisted of transcribed recordings from dialogue in the project meetings, thematic notes from the participants and researcher's logs (Røise & Bjerkholt, 2020). Moreover, in this article, transcribed data is added from the recording of a follow-up meeting with the participants in the action research project, which took place 15 months after finishing the project.

The voices of 24 students were included in the research through 4 focus groups. Focus groups were led by the author of this article, and teachers and career counsellors in the research project participated in the focus groups as observers. Data consisted of transcribed recordings of the focus groups (Røise, 2022 in press).

Applying an abductive analysis approach (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), interpretation of the empirical research moved between levels of handling the empirically based knowledge from these studies, critical interpretation and reflections on a theoretically grounded knowledge of Community Interaction Theory and emancipation. This process of filtering and interpreting made visible a theoretical metaperspective, which was indirectly imprinted in the material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

Findings

Here are presented, four perspectives of theoretical development that became visible as a part of the abductive analysis. Attention was given to the interplay between community interactions, the empirical data, and the emancipatory purpose of career education.

Critical awareness

The students' experiences provided insight into how their opportunities to reflect on their experience of placement are limited when placement activities are linked to academic school assignments and assessment.

Throughout the action research project, teachers had developed school tasks as a part of the work week. The students would answer questions, take pictures and with that bring school tasks to their workplace visits. After the work week, time was allocated at school for the students to make presentations on their experiences and share them with the rest of their class. These presentations were graded as a part of the subject Norwegian. However, most time in the classroom was allocated to all students sharing their presentations, therefore little time was left for questions or reflections.

I also sometimes think when I sit and have these presentations that "oh, now there were like twenty presentations, and then there are some who are about the same". (...) And then you go through all of them, and it takes a lot of time. And then you know that you are going to move on to something else afterwards, and then that presentation stands on its own.

(Teacher, female, transcript follow-up meeting, my translation.)

It became apparent that this prioritisation leaves little room for the explorations of students' complementary or contradictory experiences. This indicates a pedagogical practice that does not interrupt students' taken-for-granted truths (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2008). Therefore, if critical thinking and dialogue are absent, the subject is in danger of emphasising an adaptive, instead of an emancipatory dimension (Freire, 1970a). This finding sheds light on the purpose of career education, which is not about reducing students' role to social adaptation, but to free students, through critical thinking, from fixed perceptions about future education and work.

Complexity

As stated, to expand students' opportunity awareness, an emancipatory perspective presumes a complexity in career education. Through experienced-based learning across contexts, students can access parts of society that formerly were not accessible for them. The empirical material shows that even though students do not solely experience placements activities as positive, they are clear about wanting more experiences with

the purpose of orientating themselves. As a student in a focus group expresses:

‘[...] It would have been nice to try more [things]. I still do not know exactly what I want to be, because I think everything is just as fun.’

(Student, transcript focus group, male, my translation.).

This points towards the central task for education to provide students with a richer complexity of experiences and impressions to relate to, regarding exploration of future education, work and life in general.

Contextualisation

In the data material attention is given to considerations related to relevance in career learning processes, in describing contextualisation as a source of complexity in career learning. According to Law (2004), relevance in career teaching is created through a link between students’ lives as part of education, and education as part of students’ lives (Law, 2004). International research emphasises the importance of connecting students’ knowledge and skills to the context in which they are used (Guile & Griffiths, 2001). Students who participated in this research project expressed seeking a connection between work in school that seems relevant in encounters outside school, while in the process of interacting.

On the one hand, my findings confirm earlier research, where students experience placement as useful and meaningful on an individual level (Messer, 2017), and expand students’ perspectives on education and working life (Klindt Poulsen, 2020), through experiential learning (Buland et al., 2014). On the other hand, my findings highlight that students experience challenges in understanding the connection between lower secondary education and competence requirements in working life. As one of the students describes work week:

Yes, there are many who drive and bother that at school you only learn math and such, and not what you have to do later in life. While here you actually learn what to do next, how it is.

(Student, transcript, focus group 2, my translation.)

From a political point of view, career education must contribute to an increased understanding of working life’s requirements for knowledge and competence (OECD, 2014). However, when school is not perceived as relevant for education and profession, it affects further educational choices (Sandal, 2014).

If the aim for placement is to give students insight into working life, it can be criticised that some placement activities only give students limited insight. For some students in the data material, their routine work tasks did not necessarily reflect the competence requirements in specific professions, nor did it promote an understanding of the relevance of schooling. Here, a tension emerges in the research related to contextualisation. While placement activities give the student the opportunity to gain insight into realities other than school, these activities also contribute to the students returning to school with new insights, which provide new perspectives on the learning that takes place in school.

A pitfall would be to reduce teaching practices to the transfer of information to students, who do not need to understand coherence between school and the world of work in order to learn it. Teaching should not be reduced to ‘reading of the word’ or ‘reading of the text’, but should promote coherence with ‘reading of the world’ and ‘reading of the context’ (Freire, 1997). This point towards a clear communication of the purpose of work experience-based programs in career education.

In this analysis, attention is drawn to school and work as different contexts for career learning, where career education is not intended to make school and working life similar contexts, but to regard tensions and contradictions across contexts as sources of reflection. This finding is a contribution to the development of career learning theory and emphasises the importance of contextualization in learning processes.

Collective reflection

The findings also show the potential for collective reflection after placement activities. Where the classroom activities left little time for discussions and reflection, the focus groups turned out to be an arena for collective reflection on the individual experiences

related to placement. Furthermore, students expressed the need for support and guidance related to the placements, to experience coherence (Skovhus & Poulsen, 2021). As one student describes the questions she was asked in the focus group:

Yes, it is easier when someone asks direct questions. When you talk about it with parents, it's a bit like, 'I did this, and I did this.' While now, you ask more, like, "What did you learn, actually?"

(Student, transcript focus group, female).

Collective reflection can be considered a valuable source to increase complexity and raise critical awareness in career education and anchors a liberating dialogue at the core of career education.

Development of Community Interaction Theory

Together, the four findings give foreground significance to values and qualities already embedded in Community Interaction Theory. This model illustrates the correlation between Community Interaction Theory and the values forwarded through abductive analysis in this article, as a metatheory.

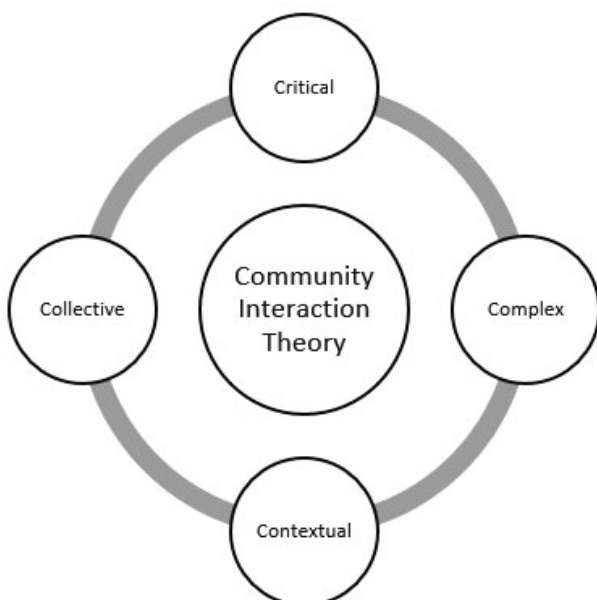


Figure 1. Model of development of Community Interaction Theory

By forwarding these values, my intention is to contribute to actualisation and further development and discussion of Bill Law's Community Interaction

Theory. In the context of career education both in Norway and globally, these dimensions can contribute to a political and educational development of career perspectives by highlighting the emancipatory purpose of career education.

Questions can be raised about how such emancipation through career education can be understood. In Law's Community Interaction Theory attention is given to the social space that lies between the individual and the structural world of work (1999). Can emancipation take place in education and working life, as these contexts are constructed and reconstructed through political, social, cultural, and economic influences (Irving, 2011)? I argue that emancipation through career education relates to adaptation; a perspective not highlighted in Law's Community Interaction Theory.

Emancipation and adaptation relate to one another as outer points on a continuum, where emancipation functions as a remedy for noncritical adaptation. Developing critical awareness is a part of education, and therefore a part of the educational structure in society. Emancipation is not about distancing oneself from society but is about actively participating in society by being critically aware of its influences, limitations and possibilities.

Critical awareness can be expressed in career education by shedding light on various working conditions in working life or contribute to freeing students from fixed perceptions of future education and work. It is through a discussion on consequences of critical awareness that dimensions of adaptation become visible.

Students in lower secondary school may not yet be able to foresee the consequences that follow sociocultural and economic structures in society (such as gender, ethnicity, sociocultural background), but career education should contribute to awareness, where emancipation and adaptation are related concepts.

Conclusion

This paper elucidates how the relationship between action research, Norwegian career education, and emancipatory theoretical perspectives can contribute

to further development of Bill Law's Community Interaction Theory (1981, 2009). By providing ample experiences for students to experience different aspects of work life and reflect on them, an argument is made to actualise and further develop Community Interaction Theory, giving foreground significance to critical, complex, contextual and collective dimensions of career learning from a metaperspective.

What would career education be reduced to if critical thinking and dialogue are absent? Career learning should be expressed through the dimension of emancipation and adaptation, where critical thinking is at the core of disrupting taken-for-granted truths on education and work. I argue that Community Interaction Theory should not be diminished to a response to labour marked needs but should be considered a response to students need for identity and community exploration, which involves dealing with both emancipation and adaptation regarding their roles in society.

This theoretical development has implications for professional practice, and the provision of career education with a renewed focus on the emancipatory potential of work-based learning. Furthermore, it needs to raise awareness amongst policy makers on the meaning of schooling and career education and facilitating the logistic and economic means to make create relevance in basic education through connecting school and work contexts. Finally, a development of career learning theory can inspire more research from the perspective of the students, teachers and school-based career counsellors on the possibilities and challenges when forwarding the emancipatory purpose of career education.

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For correspondence

Petra Røise,
Assistant Professor
University of Southeastern-Norway

petra.roise@usn.no