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An exploration of the impact of different peer learning activities utilised to develop student employability

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ABSTRACT

Assumptions about fostering human capital for national competitiveness underpin higher education policy drivers regarding employability. Departing from this focus on human capital development, research has highlighted the importance of relationality for employability, but there is a gap in scholarship about the role of peer relationships. Drawing on interview data about a curriculum-based intervention in an English university business school, we examine how students reflect upon and what they gain from peers in peer-focused employability learning experiences facilitated by external professionals. A ‘graduate capitals’ lens is used to illuminate student learning. Through group coaching, students’ identity capital grows by comparing themselves to peers and recognising mutual concerns; and through group activities in an assessment centre, students’ cultural capital expands through observation of peers and interaction with each other. We conclude by discussing the importance of reflexivity stimulated by peer interactions, and how to address student reluctance to engage with peer-based learning.

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Employability; peer learning; higher education; graduate capitals

Introduction

Employability is a strategic focus in higher education in many countries (Behle 2020; Dalrymple et al. 2021), and assumptions about the role of universities in the development of human capital have underpinned public policy for decades. In the UK, this has led most recently to ‘Graduate Outcomes’ becoming a measure of success for universities as required by the Higher Education and Research Act (2017). In response to market imperatives, universities have implemented a range of initiatives to support individual employability and likely employment outcomes. Meanwhile, critical employability research (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Clarke 2018) has highlighted the limitations of

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what universities and their students can do to foster employability in the face of structural and labour market inequalities. The risk of individualising structural challenges in policy and practices is an enduring concern.

Definitions of individual employability (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Hillage and Pollard 1998; Yorke 2006) usually include references to knowledge, skills, attributes and attitudes as well as how these influence (1) individuals' presentation of themselves in the job market and (2) their abilities to become effective members of the workforce and economy. This article draws upon Tomlinson's (2017) conceptualisation of employability which consists of a range of interactive capitals (or resources) that graduates develop through experience: human, social, cultural identity and psychological capitals. Following Holmes (2013), we also recognise competing perspectives, i.e. possessional, positional and processual that surround understandings of how employability-related capitals are acquired.

Researchers have called for a need to expand practice and research to include contextual and relational issues that contribute to the development of employability (Clarke 2018; Holmes 2013; Tomlinson and Holmes 2016). Existing studies in the graduate employability literature have analysed the role of relationships with stakeholders, such as university staff, employers and families (Christie and Burke 2021; Cunningham, Christie, and Antoniadou 2022; Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011). An area that has been neglected, however, is peer-to-peer learning (Donald and Ford 2023); this is important as it contributes not only to how individual employability develops, but also to the kind of citizens, workers and leaders, universities are helping to create (ISE 2021; Kahn and Lundgren-Resenterra 2023; Meechan 2017). Meanwhile, research from the wider careers literature (Thomsen 2012) has argued for a more collectivistic approach to career learning, foregrounding the role of 'groups' and 'communities' including the value of peers.

Our research seeks to fill a gap in scholarship about peer learning for employability. Research questions address how students reflect upon their interactions with peers in employability-related learning and, how these interactions contribute to student employability. We draw upon qualitative data collected about an intervention in an English, metropolitan business school that took place over two years between 2018 and 2020. Student perspectives were gathered about experiences that included peer interactions (group coaching and group-work in a simulated assessment centre).

Through addressing its research questions, this article makes several contributions. It adds to the peer learning literature (Aitchison and Lee 2006; Donald and Ford 2023; Hanson et al. 2016) with insights about employability learning. Specifically, it proposes two broad themes to describe the impact of different activities, which create opportunities to develop peer-based social capital. Firstly, through group coaching, students' identity capital grows by comparing themselves to peers and recognising mutual concerns. Secondly, through group activities in a simulated assessment centre, students' cultural capital expands through observation of peers and interaction with each other. In addition, the research extends scholarship about graduate employability, adding to the graduate capitals literature (Tomlinson 2017); and contributes to a growing interest in collective learning in the wider careers literature (Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen 2017; Thomsen 2012).

Employability and peer learning

Emerging from the relationship between higher education and the labour market, there has been an enduring focus on how universities embed and support the employability of students (QAA 2018). Through their review of HE employability practices, Artess, Hooley, and Mellors-Bourne (2017) outline a range of strategies Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have applied including curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular interventions. A clear theme within reviews and frameworks is that employability is a multi-stakeholder project involving students, universities and employers. This trend is supported by research that argues that employability cannot be taught in traditional lectures (Clarke 2018; Jackson 2015; Mason, Williams, and Cranmer 2009). For example, Jackson (2016) maintains that work integrated learning (WIL) which involves work experience/placements with suitable preparatory and assessment activities, is an effective approach to support students' pre-professional identity and subsequently their employability. Literature about employability is fragmented (Healy, Hammer, and Mcilveen 2022) and includes diverse bodies of work which address specific interventions and topics, such as the impact of coaching and mentoring (Van Der Baan et al. 2024).

There has been sparse attention given to peer engagement in pedagogies for employability/career learning. Indeed, engrained notions surrounding the 'individual career actor' may act as a barrier as students can resist the possibility of learning from and helping others (Boud, Cohen, and Sampson 2014, 11). However, some authors propose that peer learning can increase employability skills (Donald and Ford 2023; Jones, Torezani, and Luca 2012). In their analysis of peer-assisted learning schemes, Donald and Ford (2023) observe benefits for student mentors and mentees who gain transferable skills and career-related support through timetabled and voluntary activities. Jones, Torezani, and Luca (2012) highlight how structured peer ambassador roles assist in building community networks, reduce isolation and expand career opportunities. Meanwhile Parker, Hall, and Kram's (2008) study of peer coaching with MBA students illustrates the importance of matching, motivation and emotional engagement for successful career learning. However, there remains a gap in understanding a wider range of peer learning activities (especially curriculum-based) for employability, and how students reflect on their impact.

Meanwhile, educational research has consistently highlighted the benefits of peer learning. Topping (2005) argues that peer learning is one of the oldest and widespread forms of pedagogy. There is a broad body of literature discussing its benefits including improved attainment, development of critical thinking, communication/social skills, self-esteem, metacognition, reflection and managing one's own learnings (Aitchison and Lee 2006; Biggs 2003; Boud, Cohen, and Sampson 2014; Gergen 2015; Hanson et al. 2016). For Biggs (2003), peer learning creates an environment where engaging in different perspectives allows students to develop self-insight through comparison with peers. When students arrive at different conclusions through problem-solving activities the shock of contrasting opinions can engender a higher level of introspection and develop a more open approach to alternatives.

Authors from the wider careers literature have advocated for the role of peer learning, arguing for a radical approach that rejects individualised discourses around

employability. Thomsen (2012) highlights the role of groups and communities, challenging assumptions about individual private discussions as a 'gold standard'. She argues that private conversations about career dilemmas/plans conducted by practitioners can serve to 'conceal the connection between these problems and social contexts' (201); thereby contributing to responsabilisation. Collective and group-based strategies (Meldrum 2021) are proposed as part of a critical pedagogy which challenges individualistic assumptions in both the learning content as well as in the pedagogic form. Despite a growing interest in these theoretical ideas, there has been little empirical work to explore how collectivistic approaches can be enacted in practice in higher education.

The issue remains, what does employability really mean and what does it provide for students and employers. In the UK, and beyond, there has been a prolonged preoccupation with transferable skills and/or graduate attributes in higher education policy and practice (Burke 2015). Such a focus has been met with significant criticism (Clarke 2018; Holmes 2013; Tomlinson 2017). Holmes (2013) is critical of the narrative where graduates are understood to 'possess' skills and are therefore employable. Rather than this 'possessional' model, he advocates for a 'processual' model of graduate identity which is emergent, constantly evolving and requires both internal/external validation. Clarke (2018) argues for a more nuanced understanding of graduate employability, due to its complex nature where higher education is only one of many stakeholders. Jackson (2016) utilises the concept of pre-professional identity, which evolves especially through WIL, as an alternative to the notion of an employable graduate defined by a set of skills. In a shift away from a preoccupation with the 'possession' of skills and ensuing debates, Tomlinson (2017) provides his 'graduate capitals' model in an effort to consider graduate employability as both relational and dynamic. In addition, his model departs from the positional model also critiqued by Holmes (2013) by suggesting how resources/opportunities for social mobility can be created (Tomlinson et al. 2017). In the following section, we introduce the origins/mechanics of the forms of graduate capital important to this study.

Applying a 'graduate capitals' lens to explore peer learning

We focus here on a trio of capitals (social, cultural, identity) which we observed to be closely associated with the process of peer learning and what students in this study gained from it. Notably, Tomlinson's (2017) model integrates numerous theoretical positions regarding forms of capital, some of which he departs from significantly.

For Tomlinson (2017), social capital is understood as an opportunity to exchange credentials through developing social connections with potential employers. Social capital can be developed through activities such as careers fairs, social media, internships and work experience. Social capital provides individuals with valuable insights into shifts and requirements within the labour market. Tomlinson's version of social capital builds on a trio of previous forms of social capital from Bourdieu (2004), Putnam (2000) and Granovetter (1985). Whilst acknowledging Bourdieu's (2004) argument that social capital is not available to everyone (thus a source of its influence) Tomlinson adopts, what we observe to be a more positive interpretation of social capital. He echoes the benefits and the 'levelling up' opportunities of social capital which Putnam (2000) presents as offering both national/economic and individual benefits. Tomlinson draws

on Putnam's (2000) bridging/bonding model where social networks either consolidate a social group or provide an opportunity to develop social networks and gain experience. Adding to his model of social capital, Tomlinson utilises Granovetter's (1985) concept of 'weak ties' and 'strong ties'. While strong ties, including family and friends, may provide information concerning employment opportunities, weak ties with employers stretch social networks into unexplored areas which create opportunities. For Tomlinson, employability is supported by focusing on bridging capitals and weak ties, which are being developed not just reinforced. In this research, we explore how peer relationships, which offer bridging/bonding opportunities and weak ties, may give scope for development of a form of peer-oriented social capital, an area Tomlinson does not address directly.

Moving to cultural capital, Tomlinson (2017) cites Bourdieu's (2004) work as the starting point for his presentation of cultural capital. For Bourdieu (2004) cultural capital was a way of accounting for scholastic achievements and their unequal distribution between different social classes. It can be understood as a range of forms of knowledge, dispositions, orientations and linguistic competency. Savage et al. (2015) argue that these dispositions/competencies become a capital as they have the potential to create an advantage for one individual over another. For Bourdieu (2004) cultural capital has three forms: embodied, objectified and institutional. Tomlinson (2017) adopts a 'diluted' form of cultural capital, focused specifically to the graduate labour market. It is a cultural competency, described as, 'culturally-valued knowledge, dispositions and behaviours which are aligned to the workplace ...' (343). For Tomlinson, it is the ability to decode the culture of an organisation and then demonstrate both an understanding of it and a belonging to that organisation. Through supporting an individual to orientate and signal belonging, cultural capital can increase an individual's level of confidence, motivation and understanding of how to achieve goals. This is a complex process, and while Tomlinson recognises the classed dynamic of cultural capital, he contends that through a 'cultural exposure approach' (2017, 344) individuals can develop a sense of belonging and learn to signal cultural capital. Notably, while Bourdieu (2004) is cited as a key influence, cultural capital within the graduate capitals model departs clearly from Bourdieu. Firstly, Tomlinson does not consider the relationship between cultural capital and habitus; in effect capital is an isolated concept. Secondly, cultural capital is presented as something which can be developed with relative ease, in contrast to the effort and time, Bourdieu (2004) argues is required. Thirdly, Tomlinson does not differentiate forms of cultural capital. However, we maintain that within Bourdieusian nomenclature the form of cultural capital Tomlinson draws upon is closest to embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 2004); cultural capital which is the embodiment of dispositions and orientations articulated through both the mind and body. Our research explores how peer learning provides a way to develop and signal cultural capital.

The final capital utilised in our study is identity capital. For Tomlinson (2017), this is the level of investment a graduate makes toward developing an employable self. The theoretical heritage of this form includes the reflexive individual within a late modern society (Beck 1992; Côté 2005). As the labour market is seen to be increasingly an individual pursuit (enjoying blame and glory), this is a site for individuals to craft who they are and convince employers of this claim (Holmes 2013). Graduates can construct a narrative of self which is congruent to the labour market/sector they intend to enter and

author an identity which they can embody and signal; as such it needs to be something achievable and aligned to who they are. In part identity capital supports impression management, where individuals present a version of themselves that is desirable to an external audience. Identity capital works alongside other capitals, especially social and cultural capital, in articulating an employable identity. However, it is more than presenting a version of self, aligned to the interests of an employer. Prior to this confirmatory element of identity capital, in-depth work is required to create this identity (Côté 2005). This is an element of identity capital which has been overlooked due to a focus on its presentation (Pham, Tomlinson, and Thompson 2019; Wallis 2021). Highlighting the processual nature of identity capital development, Tomlinson draws on Jackson's (2016) work on pre-professional identity where students develop an awareness of how they compare in relation to desired employability and set goals and a pathway to achieve them. Tomlinson (2017) recognises that identity capital can be developed when still in university through extra-curricular activities, engagement with careers services and other experiential learning. Our employability intervention provided students with such an opportunity.

In summary, whilst peer learning has been researched in the educational literature, it is under-explored in research about graduate employability. Our article responds to a growing interest in relational and processual aspects of employability, and we utilise Tomlinson's capitals as a lens to illuminate our research questions about the impact of peer learning.

Methodology and context

A two-year (2018–19 and 2019–20) employability intervention was conducted with students in the final year of studies within a business school in a metropolitan university in the north of England. The students came from two courses: (1) accounting and (2) business. Students on these courses were identified as able to benefit from additional support, with recognition that many were from 'first-generation' backgrounds, without strong networks to smooth transition into the labour market. In total, approximately 1,600 students participated over the two-year period of the intervention (800 per year). The overarching strategic aim of the intervention was to contribute to the improvement of Graduate Outcomes metrics.

The content of the intervention in year one and two varied slightly as the university wanted to test out different activities (i.e. coaching and simulated assessment centre). Different cohorts of students participated in each year. Both activities foregrounded peer learning as a pedagogic method. A collective experience was fostered across both years as coaching sessions took place in one large room, designated the 'Coaching Studio' and the assessment centre took place on one day in a location outside the

Table 1. Main activities (including peer learning).

	Coaching	Simulated Assessment Centre
Year one	Four sessions; two were one-to-one and two were one-to-four.	
Year two	Two sessions; One was one-to-one and the second was one-to-four.	Group role play exercise (six students). Presentation to group (four students).

university. Both were facilitated by professionals, external to the university, an aspect that allowed for framing of activities as a type of ‘moderate’ WIL, linked to the regular curriculum. Coaches were qualified and had discretion about models to use, albeit with a careers focus. The simulated assessment centre was run by recruitment/selection specialists. The integrated utilisation of external professionals to facilitate peer learning required the university to make an additional material investment to the intervention. [Table 1](#) outlines the main activities of the intervention.

The intervention was embedded into a compulsory unit with 10% of total marks for that unit awarded for completion of activities (i.e. subject content given 90%). Participation was assessed through attendance records and submission of a reflective essay. The compulsory nature was decided upon due to previous research that indicates that optional employability activity risks being ignored by students who have most to benefit (Greenbank 2015), with higher engagement from those who already may have more valuable graduate capitals.

The first author was enlisted to lead a research evaluation that could analyse the intervention’s impact. The evaluation sought to generate new insights into student perspectives that could be of wider interest, not just for an instrumental institutional purpose (Saunders 2012). Ethical approval was arranged to conduct the research in the host university. The use of qualitative methodology allowed for a deeper understanding of how the intervention was experienced. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with students, two/three months after completion of the intervention. An invitation to participate was sent to all students in the intervention and everyone who volunteered was interviewed. Participants also completed a questionnaire with demographic data. After the first year, 18 students were interviewed: after the second year, 17. All interviews were either in person or via video call and were conducted by three researchers (including first and second authors).

The details of our diverse group of 35 research participants from both year one and two of the intervention are aggregated in [Table 2](#). The details illustrate characteristics/circumstances typical of a student population in a metropolitan university. Basic demographic characteristics are attached to quotes in findings. However, we make limited claims about how demographic differences may impact experience of peer learning. While the small number of participants limits generalisability, this was not the intention of the study nor is it always applicable in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). The application of a graduate capitals lens, alongside our presentation of context, contributes to the ‘transferability’ of findings, a concept advocated by Braun and Clarke (2021).

Table 2. Research participants.

Course: Accounting (15); Business (17); Other (3)
Gender: Male (21); Female (14)
Ethnicity: BAME (15); non-BAME (20)
First in family: First Gen ^a , (19); Not First Gen (14); N/A (2)
Disability: Disabled (5); Not disabled (29); N/A (1)
POLAR (home domicile): High Participation (16); Low Participation ^a (14); N/A (5)
Qualifications on entry to HE: Academic (19); Vocational/other (13); N/A (3)
Status: Home (32); EU/International (3)
Age: 21–24 (28); 25–29 (5); 30 + (2)

^aFirst Generation/POLAR Low Participation used in UK Higher Education as proxy measure for less well-off backgrounds.

Interview questions were informed by themes from existing employability research (Clarke 2018; Jackson 2015; Thomsen 2012; Tomlinson 2017). The year one interviews consisted of nine open-ended questions, which addressed self-perceived employability capitals development, perceptions of career learning processes (including peer interactions) and awareness of structural issues. Questions for the year two interviews were again open ended and followed very similar themes; however, additional questions related to the assessment centre simulation which was new in the second year were included.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) was both deductive in searching out themes informed by a graduate capitals lens, while also inductive and open to new discoveries about peer learning. Priority for analyses was to illuminate research questions about peer learning as this was a unique feature of the activities undertaken, rather than exploring the specifics of coaching or simulated assessment centres. Analysis involved a process of immersion to code data (NVIVO utilised). The research team members (first and second authors) each separately considered topics, before discussing and constructing themes. Analysis of transcripts revealed how extensively in answers to questions about processes of employability learning, students reported on interactions with one another (facilitated by external professionals) with implications about the importance of these. The analysis embraced a 'dialogic' approach as we sought out examples of how students reflected upon their interaction with others. Specifically, we borrow from Holland et al.'s (1998) social constructivist theory and their application of the related concepts of 'dialogism' and 'positionality'. Dialogism reflects that individuals exist in a process of addressing and answering within a context that can include specific interlocutors (for example, peers and external professionals) but also their wider context (for example, the university and the labour market), arguing that no-one speaks as a freewheeling individual. Methodologically, a search for 'dialogism' was important as it conceptualises all communication as intersubjective; and relatedly, exploration of dialogic communication can offer insights into levels of awareness of individual 'positionality'. Guided by this approach quotes were chosen for the findings section which evoke how students reflect upon actual and internal dialogues with peers.

Findings and discussion

Our findings explore students' interactions with their peers and how these interactions contribute to employability. They are structured around the two main interacting research questions: how students reflect on the process of peer learning and what they gain from it. The novel facilitation of peer learning in a non-competitive environment by external specialists framed as 'moderate' WIL added to levels of student engagement. The creation of collective experiences had an impact on students' employability in nuanced ways. Interaction with peers assisted in strengthening certain aspects of employability; visible through a graduate capitals lens (Tomlinson 2017) – social, identity and cultural capitals developed. Notably, the two major activities contributed to the development of different capitals.

Group coaching: growing identity capital through comparison and mutuality

The theme, 'growing identity capital through comparison and mutuality' centres around participants' gaining a greater understanding of their own position in relation to the

graduate labour market through interacting with their peers. Interestingly, the experience of discussing careers with a group of peers was something few interview participants had experienced previously. Despite the public nature of working lives, career conversations are not routine topics for peers. Exceptions to this tended to be more mature students. Participants presented two contrasting but related accounts of the impact of peer interactions. Accounts capture how they both compare themselves to one another and reflect upon what they share in common. We go onto theorise that the social capital ‘weak ties’ of peer learning transfer to identity capital as students are stimulated to reflect more deeply upon themselves enabling them to better evaluate their own strengths/weaknesses in relation to others.

The first type of impact from peer interactions in group coaching was associated with how participants compared themselves to others with a clear impression that students routinely do this, and that this can contribute to an awareness of their own position in relation to employability. Participant 18 responded lucidly by arguing that group interactions are valuable as students get a ‘wake-up call’ from their peers in a way that has more impact than when a ‘good grown up’ tells them.

... I could see that the group ones really benefited other people, cos they had no idea and I think sometimes they need telling from a student perspective ... they realise, oh crap, everyone else is actually getting on with their lives and I’ve not been doing anything ... they kind of need that wake-up call ... rather than a good grown up telling you. (Participant 18, 2019, Male, British Asian, 22, First Gen.)

In contrast, other participants compared themselves favourably to their peers, considering themselves more advanced in their envisaging/actioning of a future self in the labour market. Such comments raise a challenge for educators who wish to facilitate mixed-group activities, with the hope that more ‘career ready’ students may be able to help those who are less prepared. Participant 2 was shocked by the poor preparation of some peers:

I was sat there with three guys ... I go last. And then the coach goes round ... , right what’s your situation And (the first one) he’s like, well not much really and (the second one) ... well I’m thinking of making a CV once I’ve finished my exams. And I’m like what!? You know ... (and the third one) oh I’ll maybe go home and work with my dad’s business ... these guys are on just a completely different level to me ... (Participant 2, 2019 – Male, White British, 26, Not First Gen.)

More negatively, one participant expressed the sceptical view that groups can be affected by inauthenticity as people compete with one another.

Like people tend to compete ... If you’re in a group everyone’s competing. Oh, I’ve done this, oh I’ve done that, or I’ve got this or I’ve got that when you’ve really not done anything. So that’s why I don’t like the group ones. (Participant 5, 2020, Female, Mixed ethnicity, 25, Not First Gen.)

The second impact of peer interactions in group coaching was the reassurance of knowing that they shared mutual concerns about the future, and some expressed the view that they enjoyed feeling that they could help others. A clear sense of identifying with others and ‘mutuality’ emerged, resonating with existing peer learning research (Aitchison and Lee 2006; Hanson et al. 2016). As such, there appeared to be an affective/emotional aspect to the learning experience.

... I wasn't the only person that didn't know what I wanted to do ... before I thought it was just me and I think that kind of made me feel a bit more confident ... because as a group we were helping each other ... you get advice off students, people who are going through what you're going through. (Participant 1 2019 – Male, British Asian, 21, First Gen.)

Participant 10 used the phrase 'same boat', a popular term within our participant group, to describe the reassurance and confidence built from interacting with others.

... there were other people in the same boat as me. I thought I was the only person struggling to find a job but ... there were three or four other people in the same boat as me. When they were explaining their situation, I thought okay we can ... relate over here and help each other out ... the coaching gave me a chance to speak in the groups and listen to other people's opinions so it ... boosted my confidence ... (Participant 10. 2019, Male, British Asian, 23, First Gen.)

The 'same boat' narrative recurred for several participants. In addition to reassurance gained, an appreciation of the greater difficulties others faced was mentioned by some. Participant 19, 2020 was even more positive about the shared experience and learning from each other's stories, suggesting that the experience was transformative for her.

... when you're in a group setting, you listen to someone of your same age ... And that's where you learn ... Everyone else is having a difficult time and they were all overcoming it ... When you hear someone else's inspiring stories ... you feel like, they've done it, it shouldn't be that hard ... So, from based on what I was at the start of the year to what I am at the end of the year is two different people ... (Participant 19, 2020, Female, Asian, 24, Not First Gen.)

The impact of mutually supportive interactions with peers facilitated by external professionals is important. While Tomlinson (2017) reserves social capital as learning about and accessing social networks closely connected to employment opportunities, we argue that the concept can be extended to include peer learning and suggest how it can be developed in nuanced ways within the curriculum. We define this as 'transitory social capital' as it is less organic than the representation in Tomlinson's model and is structured by the university. While representations from literature (Ingram et al. 2023) tend to focus on students using social capital beyond their university peers there is scope for focusing on peer learning and developing social capital within a student community. In essence 'bridging capitals' or 'weak ties' provide a level of reassurance concerning current position/employment strategy, a sense of consciousness around the opportunity to develop a career strategy or a sense of comfort that it is never too late to develop a graduate employment plan. Whether participants refer to being in the 'same boat' or not, there is a clear reassurance from learning from career conversations with other students.

Conceptually, we observe that this form of transitory social capital leads to increased levels of identity capital. The graduate capitals model is holistic; various forms of mutually dependent capitals support an overall concept of 'graduateness' (Tomlinson 2008). Transference is central to demonstrating the impact of peer learning and how transitory social capital can lead to increased identity capital. Because of engaging with their peers, participants reported increased levels of motivation to begin and/or enhance their self-authoring in crafting their employability narrative. Students who benefit the most were those who gained reassurance that they were not too far behind

their cohort and still had time to develop a graduate identity. Described as a ‘wake-up call’ by one participant the stimulus of transitory social capital creates a new focus on employability. There are subtle differences in this form of peer-based social capital in comparison to Tomlinson’s (2017) definition, in which social capital is expected to reproduce itself, creating and re-creating tangible opportunities. In this study, social capital was transitory, offering similar benefits to Putnam’s (2000) bridging capital in that it goes beyond participants’ current networks and reference of action, but it is not a lasting structure. We do however maintain that the development and transfer of capitals within the student cohort is complex, takes time and focused effort. As such, while we apply Tomlinson’s (2017) conceptual tools, we question the apparent speed and simplicity of how capital development is implied in his model.

Simulated Assessment Centre: growing cultural capital through observation and interaction

The theme, ‘growing cultural capital through observation and interaction’ centres around how students’ respond to their peers’ behaviours when participating in simulated selection activities and learn from those behaviours to improve their own approach to real selection activities in the future. Participants discussed how they gained insights about effective behaviour as they interacted on specially designed assessment centre tasks. They developed what can be described as know-how, a concept utilised in peer learning literature (Aitchison and Lee 2006). The analyses suggest that students gain a particular type of know-how by learning from peers in collective experiences, which is not available through traditional individual advice or classroom tasks. The analyses outline how this know-how most closely aligns with cultural capital in Tomlinson’s model.

Professional behaviours regarding team-working and communication emerged as important as participants commented on the different behaviours of peers. Regarding communication (in a presentation), one example that was mentioned by several participants was the varied quality of preparation, content and delivery for a 5-minute presentation to a small group of peers and an external recruitment specialist. Regarding communication (in teams), participant 32, reflected upon how to adapt to behaving to ‘strangers’ as they were put into random groups for simulated activities.

... you have to work with people that you haven’t spoken to before and that’s good experience, just adapt yourself to new environments and new people and the way that people come across and the body language and how you engage with them. (Participant 32, 2020, Male, White British, 21, First Gen.)

Participant 20, 2020, appreciated the tangible tips about how to behave in group assessment activities, giving a specific example of the importance of drawing out quieter group members.

... one person, she didn’t say anything the whole time in the group, and then the leader said to us ... why didn’t you ask her what she was thinking instead of just letting her go quiet. So, things like that I could take forwards to the future and a real interview. (Participant 20, 2020, Male, White British, 21, First Gen.)

Meanwhile, some participants who reported themselves as quieter in team scenarios, described gaining ideas about how to behave effectively in such situations (e.g. as

note-taker, timekeeper), to ensure they were still active in the group. Another challenge of team-working was highlighted by participant 27, who acknowledged that she was not a natural team-worker and would prefer to work alone but participation pushed her to reflect on how she would have to find ways to work in future teams.

Working as a team player doesn't excite me ... I just bulldoze my way ... and not consider maybe that's not the best approach for someone else. ... we all have different abilities. So that group-setting made me see that. Okay I had to take a step back ... and then that's one of the feedbacks I received ... Yeah so, I really took a lot from it, ... I can't work by myself all the time, so I must work with other people. (Participant 27, 2020, Female, Black African, 35, Not First Gen.)

Experiencing immediate feedback together with peers was also important and was integral to the role of external facilitators. Students commented on appreciating the feedback they received but also hearing feedback with and to peers. The phrase 'constructive criticism' was used in reflecting on how facilitators offered feedback to the group and a growing realisation of the 'little steps' that can lead to progress.

But we had someone who was very assertive ... he was ... talking but nobody else was contributing, so I tried to like take charge a bit ... when she (facilitator) noticed that and ... made me feel like good about what I'd done ... she was able to criticise us, but also give constructive criticism, so it felt like, okay I know what I need to do in the future. It made me more aware of the little steps you had to take. (Participant 24, 2020, Female, Black British, 23, First Gen.)

Interacting with peers at the simulated assessment centre was another structured opportunity to transfer their 'transitory social capital' to another form of graduate capital: cultural capital (Tomlinson 2017). In this context, students gained specific know-how about how to behave in selection activities through engaging with their peers and reflecting on their practice. The knowledge and dispositions that participants demonstrated included communication, team-working and ways of adapting personality traits to their advantage. This we argue is in line with Tomlinson's (2017) cultural capital including specific knowledge, dispositions and behaviours which are recognised and rewarded by the labour market. While Tomlinson does not differentiate forms of cultural capital there are echoes here with Bourdieu's (2004) embodied cultural. This can be seen most clearly in participants who spoke of learning, through peer engagement, how to modify ways they communicated ideas, responded to instructions and the importance of body language.

For Bourdieu (2004) cultural capital is something which can be developed but is 'always marked by its earliest forms of acquisition' (2004, 245). However, Reay, David, and Ball (2005) maintain that the development of embodied cultural capital requires pedagogical action. Through this intervention there is such action in relation to peers and facilitators. With peers, students engaged in simulated activities to develop recognition of the needs for knowledge and dispositions aligned to the workforce and also have the opportunity to practise signalling their cultural capital. Facilitators provided 'constructive feedback' on the knowledge and dispositions displayed in groups; such feedback resembles the role of the family and the early schooling environment identified by Bourdieu (2004) as central to development of embodied cultural capital. In addition, the feedback participants received is similar to the confirmatory role that employers play in Holmes' (2013) processual model of graduate identity.

As such, similar to our discussion above on identity capital, we argue that this form of capital can be developed through peer learning and does not need to rely on a work-based environment as implied by Tomlinson (2017). We maintain that these ‘transferable’ employability resources applied to a simulated activity are associated with emerging cultural capital, as students learn about desirable behaviours. Participants also practised the signalling of cultural capital to peers and staff facilitating the intervention. Signalling desirable cultural codes and behaviours is a key stage in cultural capital development and is central to employability.

Conclusions

The findings of our analyses led to the identification of two conceptual themes to describe how students reflect upon and what they gain from peer learning in employability activities. In proposing these themes, we contribute to existing research on peer learning (Aitchison and Lee 2006; Hanson et al. 2016), relationality in employability (Donald and Ford 2023; Holmes 2013; Jackson 2016) and pedagogies for campus-based WIL (Jackson 2015). We have explored the existing framing of social, cultural and identity capitals in Tomlinson’s model (2017) and observe the complexity of capital development, transfer and interaction of capitals, utilising the notion of ‘transitory social capital’ in peer learning. However, in this concluding section we move on to discuss and unpack issues pertinent to both themes; the role of student reflexivity and reluctance.

Having outlined that students’ ‘transitory social capital’ transfers to identity or cultural capital, it is important to consider *how* students move from one form of capital to another. We argue that transference of capitals is driven by reflexivity, something that Tomlinson glosses over in his writing. His model was developed within a broader late modern ontological position and therefore may assume reflexivity as a central facet of society as outlined by Beck (1992). However, it is important to consider how this reflexive process happens and whether peer learning plays a role.

Here we draw on Archer’s (2003, 2007) extensive work on reflexivity; we understand reflexivity to be where an individual reflexively deliberates about their identity, position, choices and strategies via an ‘internal conversation’. Specifically, we argue that many of our participants resemble ‘communicative reflexives’ (Archer 2003), in other words, those whose internal conversations are supported by outward discussion which can provide a level of validation. Archer’s (2007) concept of communicative reflexivity is associated with limiting mobility because individuals tend to have conversations with others who already share social space including attitudes/practices. However, departing from this view of communicative reflexivity, we propose that it has the potential to support learning and social mobility. This is contingent on the educational system supporting a productive engagement between students. The active placement of individuals in new situations within both activities outlined in this article, created such an opportunity to stimulate increased reflexivity via peer learning. Our data illuminated participants’ understanding of the role of peer relationships and their reflections upon, for example, the ‘wake-up call’ regarding who they are and want to become when discussing their interactions with others. Participants commented on the benefits of discussing issues with peers they would not usually interact with and/or discuss such topics with. A broadening of social capital occurs, as students practise weak tie development,

which in turn leads to increasing levels of reflexivity about their own position regarding employability. For example, participant 10 (2019) describes how discussing similar concerns ('the same boat') with peers led him to consider how issues could be addressed and what options peers might have to enact solutions. Such a description illustrates how group coaching played a role for this participant in providing a stimulus to develop communicative reflexivity.

Despite many positive aspects about peer learning reported by students, we also observed a reluctance amongst some students to recognise the value of peer learning around careers and employability and a default desire for some to give greater credence to the coach or recruitment expert they were engaging with in the WIL setting. For example, participant 2 (2019) values the external coach but dismisses his peers as not being prepared enough or having unambitious goals. Meanwhile participant 25 (2020) discusses the pressure that peers feel to present an embellished portfolio of skills and experiences due to a tendency towards competition with each other. This aligns with the observations of Thomsen and her co-authors' (Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen 2017; Thomsen 2012) about the challenges of enacting a pedagogic strategy that puts groups and communities at the centre of the intervention and facilitates peer interactions as credible sources of learning. Various issues may lead students to de-value and dismiss what they can learn from others, including social class differences. They may have been influenced by individualistic assumptions about the return on investment of education that public policy has reified, which also acts as a barrier to peer learning for employability. Care needs to be taken by educators in designing group activities to meet varied needs. Integration of such activities and community-building can become part of everyday practice and reflexive preparatory work undertaken to help anticipate some of these issues (Dyke 2009; Thomsen 2017). Arguably, it may be helpful to make discussion of capitals' development explicit in managing student reluctance, and recognise non-participation as a driver to stimulate pedagogical practices to better appreciate student perspectives (Thomsen 2014).

To some extent, our analyses support what more radical proponents (Meldrum 2021; Thomsen 2012) of peer learning argue for regarding the role of relationality and collectivism, especially in how learning occurs, if not what is covered. Such authors propose relational learning between peers as an important component in an employability pedagogy that is informed by social justice. However, we recognise that establishing the right environment for this is crucial in terms of sense of belonging and community, as well as being part of everyday practice in employability learning. We have depicted the interventions within this study as 'moderate' WIL, and we propose that such activities provide a curricular option to develop graduate capitals beyond and potentially before work-based learning. Framing peer learning within campus-based, 'moderate' WIL activities was a successful strategy in this intervention but has logistics and cost implications due to use of external professionals. Our findings have implications for both curricular interventions as well as how advice and guidance services are organised. We argue against default assumptions about the privacy of career aspirations and how this plays out in conversations and activities. Enacting such an approach is challenging for educators in a marketised higher education context but is a promising way forward if we are to recognise the importance of more relational approaches to the development of employability and working lives. A skillset from both employability educators and practitioners is required

which enables them to diminish standard hierarchies. However, the analyses do point to the benefits of educators seeking diverse ways to productively integrate peer learning into employability activities which will benefit students as future workers and citizens.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [FC], upon reasonable request.

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