Cultural capital and agency: connecting critique and curriculum in higher education

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This paper explores some of the unresolved tensions in higher education systems and the contradiction between widening participation and the consolidation of social position. It shows how concepts of capital derived from Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam provide a powerful basis for critique, but risk a deficit view of students from less privileged backgrounds. These students are more likely to attend lower-status institutions and engage with an externally focused curriculum. The paper argues for greater attention to agency, and community and familial capital, in conceptualising the resilience of those from less privileged backgrounds. While the recognition of 'voice' is important, a curriculum that acknowledges the context independence of knowledge is essential if these students are not to be further disadvantaged.

Keywords: community cultural capital; widening participation; knowledge; curriculum; student voice; higher education

Introduction

This paper sets out to explore some of the complexities of mass higher education systems, which are charged with widening participation and extending opportunities, yet systematically reproduce inequalities of both experience and outcome (Ball et al. 2002; Crozier et al. 2008; Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2010; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). It explores the gap between the rhetoric of promised social mobility and personal advantage, and the realities of the consolidation of social place and status (Adnett and Slack 2007). The systematic mis-description of the goods of higher education in terms of personal economic advantage is problematic for its actors and practitioners, not just because it obscures some unpalatable truths about inequality, but also because it blocks the articulation of alternative visions of what the benefits of higher education might be in terms of the broader value for students and their futures (see, for example, Walker 2008). Moreover, casting education as a matter of individual benefits and individual achievement ignores the essentially

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hermeneutic and social nature of learning (Ashworth 2004). Progressive educators practicing in less elite settings are trapped into a series of promises they cannot realise, while those in elite institutions are largely involved in a logic of reproduction not transformation. In describing and analysing these modes of reproduction it becomes all too easy to conceptualise the capitals minority students bring with them as lacking and thus to lay the blame for continued inequalities at the door of poor schools and families.

These contradictions are structural and constitutive of the realities of students' lives and are not capable of a textual resolution. The paper cannot and does not, therefore, promise any simple solutions. Rather it contributes to the work of critical scholars in developing concepts that recognise the importance of agency, not in contradistinction to the social but as emergent from it and having real powers (Archer 2003, 2007). I argue that we should pay attention to the ways community (Yosso 2005), family (Gofen 2009), and moral (Auerbach 2006) capital may act as a resource for the articulation of possible future selves (Pizzolato 2007). We need curriculum, pedagogies and approaches that go beyond neo-liberal aspirations towards mobility and employability and towards a recovery of the values of critical pedagogy found in feminist and critical race theory.

The first part of the paper explores how some social theorists are articulating an understanding of social capital that, while recognising historic disadvantage, does not simply conceptualise disadvantage as lack. The notion of resilience is important in understanding how both participants and non-participants in higher education are capable of elaborating future possible selves by articulating and pursuing their personal projects (Walker, Gleavers, and Grey 2006). The second part of the paper turns to work on the significance of institutional habitus and pedagogy (Crozier et al. 2008). The third section turns to a missing term in the debate – curriculum (Barnett and Coate 2005; Bernstein 2000). Curriculum is important because it touches on knowledge questions (see Young 2008), which in turn relate to institutional habitus and the relevant cultural capitals. Thinking about curriculum is essential for a critique of the utilitarianism that underpins much pedagogy (Clegg 2008; Graham 2005). The final section attempts to interrogate the ways in which pedagogies of the personal have become depoliticised and individualised and cut-off from their roots in collective struggles (David and Clegg 2008), and explores more fully ideas of agency and the sorts of possible selves that higher education can support. This critique has implications for an understanding of knowledge, curriculum, and pedagogy.

Whose capital?

There is now considerable research that points to the value of social, cultural, symbolic and economic capitals in gaining access to the 'best' universities and in consolidating and enhancing cultural and social capital once accepted as

students. In their study of choice of university in the United Kingdom, Reay, David, and Ball (2005) dispel any view of choice as purely rational individual decision-making by informed consumers in a market. Rather, 'choice' is intensely social and familial, dependent on networks and connections, and the ability to make 'distinctions' between the unequal social and educational goods on offer. Even in the USA where higher education might more readily be described as a market, perceptions of social status trump market logic. Between 1995 and 2005 average tuition fees at private four-year colleges and universities rose 36%, and over the same period average tuition and fees rose 51% at public four-year institutions and 30% at community colleges (Brown 2005, 2006) – but Brown argues that these rises were a function of status competition between institutions that made 'participation less socially equitable without any compensating rise in system performance' (Brown 2006, 4). Price becomes a marker of prestige, as in the case of luxury goods, rather than a representation of intrinsic value, and competition does not drive efficiencies or lower price as market logic would suggest. The neo-liberal language of students wisely investing in their future employability, making calculations of the returns on their investment is subverted by systems that can continue increase price secure in the knowledge that the social value of what is on offer is read through the lens of class distinction not pure economic rationality.

Sociologists have drawn on Bourdieu's conception of different forms capital, and of institutional and personal habitus, as a resource for theorising the social realities of university choice (Reay, David, and Ball 2005). His concepts have also proved powerful in understanding the ways in which institutional habitus, understood as the embodiment of history as 'second nature', involves self-exclusion or 'agoraphobia', whereby students understand that some institutions are not 'right' for them (Crozier et al. 2008). So while participation is officially constructed in meritocratic and individual terms, the actual costs and benefits of participation are unevenly socially structured. Once in the field, middle-class students at university are more able to de-code what Bernstein describes as the 'invisible pedagogy' (cited in Crozier et al. 2008, 173) and to elaborate, display and accumulate additional capitals (Stevenson and Clegg 2010). As a form of social criticism, therefore, the idea of differential capitals and habitus is powerful. Yosso (2005) has argued, however, that there is a danger that cultural capital approaches can result in what she describes as 'deficit thinking', whereby the possession or lack of relevant capitals prior to entry into higher education is seen as something to be compensated for. Such a view naturalises and normalises the epistemological privileging of certain sorts of (middle-class) knowledge and mores.

Using a critical race theory lens, Yosso (2005) argues that many of the students who come from less privileged backgrounds have shown remarkable resilience. Indeed those students form poorer backgrounds who make it to university are likely to be intellectually as well as socially remarkable. In the United Kingdom, with participation rates among the highest social group now

standing at over 80% and hovering at less than 20% for the least socially privileged, it is clear that students from less privileged backgrounds are likely to have exercised considerable personal resource and resilience in simply getting to university and that they are likely to be among the most intellectually able in their communities. Yosso (2005) argues for recognition of 'outsider knowledge' and, in particular, what she characterises as 'community cultural wealth'. In a related argument, Gofen (2009) has stressed the importance of resilience and family capital in the decisions of first-generation students entering university. Drawing on a rather different notion of social capital derived primarily from Putnam (2000) and Coleman (1990), rather than Bourdieu, she argues that in some accounts the 'bonding' capital of lower socio-economic groups is seen as inhibiting social mobility by encouraging people to stay put. She suggests, however, that in some contexts bonding capital can provide an explanation for first-generation breakthrough into higher education. She emphases the specific context and setting of family capital that encompasses multiple non-economic capitals, and the bridging capital that the families in her study exhibit in making considerable sacrifices to ensure that children go to good schools: 'Family solidarity, respect, and ambition are the three main values according to which these students were raised' (Gofen 2009, 116). Auerbach (2006) documents the moral support some Latino immigrant parents offer their sons and daughters through *consejos* – cultural narratives – which parents use to express their support and which Auerback characterises as moral capital. Heath, Fuller, and Paton (2008) in their UK study draw on notions of bonding and bridging social capital in exploring the decisions of adults with appropriate entry qualifications who consciously chose not to participate in higher education (Fuller and Heath 2010). They analysed the 'networks of intimacy', friends and family members who were important to the person in making their decisions. Their insights into the habitus of non-participants are important in revealing intergenerational ambivalence, and in theorising non-participation as an important process not just a negative case.

What all these theorists share is a commitment to exploring the social resources deployed by students in decisions about whether to participate in higher education, rather than conceptualising them as lacking. They also point to the conditions of success for these students. The various arguments accord with empirical evidence from studies in US schools and colleges (for example, Leondari, Syngollitou, and Kiosseoglu 1998; Leondari 2007, Markus and Nurius 1987; Plimmer and Schmidt 2007), which show that 'resilience' and the ability to imagine a future possible self, in the forms that Yosso (2005), Gofen (2009) and Auerbach (2006) identify, is important to educational success. Possible selves are understood as an essential link between self-concept and motivation, playing both a cognitive and an affective role in motivation and success (Markus and Ruvolo 1989). While theories that elaborate on the alternative sources of capital are important, therefore, they require greater elaboration in terms of how these capitals are mobilised in ways that enable students' epistemic access to the

curriculum and not just the ability to resist the symbolic violence of the hidden curriculum. I return to these arguments later in the paper, explicitly addressing knowledge questions and pointing to sociological theories of agency that can help connect the idea of different capitals with the personal projects of students.

The significance of the research cited above, however, is that it shifts the theoretical focus and invites us to conceptualise and value forms of resilience, and the social and cultural capital that students from less economically privileged backgrounds bring with them, and it locates these capitals as being firmly within communities and families. Different combinations and forms of capital are, however, being theorised in two distinct ways: firstly as having an explanatory function in analysing sedimented privilege and reproduction; and secondly as a way of theorising and recognising that students from under-represented groups bring with them considerable resources. It might be objected that these different forms cannot all be properly theorised as 'capital' since they lack the recognition that gives high-status capital its potency and exchange value. While I recognise the pertinence of the criticism, it is nonetheless useful to extend the concept, while at the same time being specific about the different types of capital identified, as it opens up the question of what gets valued, by whom, and in what contexts, and how it might be otherwise. There is also considerable practical advantage of not seeing students without the conventional capitals as being deficient because, as generations of school research has taught us, deficit thinking is likely to prove a self-fulfilling prophesy in terms of academic achievement.

Institutional habitus – an ivory tower?

Not all universities are alike; indeed, in the United Kingdom the distinctions between them have arguably been exaggerated through the mechanism of research selectivity. Similar trends can be seen in Australia. In the USA the massive comparative wealth of some private institutions (the credit crunch not withstanding), the variable position of public institutions, and the mass of community colleges mean that distinctiveness of mission tends to be accepted at face value. These differences in institutional habitus have been described by Crozier et al. (2008; Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2010) in their work on diverse students and different higher education institutions in England as 'different strokes for different folks'. Their research builds on studies of choice which show that most students choose places where they feel they fit. The ivory tower of the elite is understood as not being right for 'some folks'. Many students from less privileged backgrounds instead choose less prestigious sites in which to study. The study by Crozier et al. (2008; Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2010) explores the ways the different institutional habituses of universities impact on working-class students' learner identities. For the small minority of working-class students who make it into elite institutions, these spaces constitute a site where, despite their social unease, they can elaborate their

intellectual selves: 'a place to display their intellectual selves without being ridiculed as odd' (Crozier et al. 2008, 174). Less elite institutions who recruit larger numbers of working-class students, and are less well resourced, present students with fewer social and cultural demands but the 'problem for these students lies with the reinforcing of low volume social capital and ultimately constrained learning experiences' (Crozier et al. 2008, 174). Such institutions are often at the forefront of pedagogic innovations and they invest in services designed to support students and avoid drop out, but as Crozier et al. (2008; Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2010) detail, this support is provided generically. In contrast in the most elite institutions, support is personal and highly targeted in a way that builds success. The conditions of learning and participation here support the development of cultural capital for these students. Work by Sommerlad (2007) looking at law students confirms that there is a problem for students in less privileged sites. She shows that, despite being successful in obtaining their law degree and professional qualifications, law firms persistently value the broader cultural capital that is cultivated at elite institutions to the point of preferring non-law first degrees from a top university followed by professional qualifications, over law degrees from a non-elite institution. Some sorts of knowing are valued above others, and students who start from less privileged background are typically unable to decode this both at the point of choice and in terms of imagining themselves as lawyers into the future.

It is important, therefore, to analyse the epistemological significance of what is getting valued and knowledge relationships, as these are internal to the higher education field and relate to reproduction of privilege in a non-reductive way. Working-class students who are able to elaborate their intellectual selves at elite institutions are accruing greater capital appropriate to the field, and the elaboration of those intellectual selves is likely to yield a return greater than that of a seemingly similar degree in a less privileged site. The interesting question is why, in terms of the values of the field, working-class and other minority students are not getting the same intellectual value in less privileged sites. There is of course the irreducible fact of inequitable resources, but I want to suggest that the issue does not end there and that there are some genuinely important curriculum questions that should be asked. Differential resources and diversity of mission are an inevitable feature of mass higher education systems, but the dispositions towards knowledge and knowing cultivated in these different sites are independent questions. In what follows I elaborate a critique based on the need to theorise curriculum more clearly, and in particular to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions about the appropriateness and meaning of a curriculum devoted to relevance and employability.

Curriculum – a missing term?

Pedagogical innovations in the newer universities dedicated to widening participation and mass education have tended to focus on support and pedagogical

processes. They have also developed more outward-facing vocational curricula, whereas the traditional disciplines and professional routes predominate at elite institutions. While the focus on pedagogy has been elaborated mainly in the guise of learning and teaching strategies, curriculum innovation has largely been presented as a matter of common-sense, especially in terms of 'relevance' and the employability agenda (Clegg 2008). There has been a burgeoning of more 'applied' courses, which are assumed to be more industry relevant, particularly in those parts of the sector that attract more students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but there has been little questioning of the sorts of knowledge implied by such curricula and in particular of extent to which knowledge in these applied areas is context specific and less capable of generalisation. The lack of debate is problematic because it ignores the extent to which for knowledge to be useful depends on the context-independent characteristics of knowledge or its truth claims (Moore 2000; Moore and Young 2001; Young 2008). Knowledge, understood from both critical realist and social constructivist perspectives, is socially produced, temporally bounded, and fallible; but critical realists also argue that it is knowledge of something, and that there is an ontological, not just epistemological, dimension to knowing (Bhasker 1978, 1989). These knowledge relations cannot be adequately subsumed under such concepts as relevance or employability; fundamental questions of context independence and validity remain. What students who are being challenged to develop their intellectual selves are doing is most importantly developing the capacity to grapple with context-independent knowledge relations and higher order principles (Maton 2009). The social and cultural elaboration of the knowing-self may or may not encourage the disposition towards particular sorts of imagined futures and towards employability.

Curriculum issues and their associated knowledge claims, however, have not been explicitly addressed in many of the debates previously reviewed. It is simply assumed that a focus on employability as relevance, and the cultivation of general skills as elaborated in personal development planning (self-regulation), for example, will produce more employable students (Clegg 2004). The support agenda and articulation of teaching and learning strategies have been largely silent on the question of the curriculum, leading in some quarters to an attack on the therapeutisation of higher education (Ecclestone and Hayes 2008). If we are to take issues of cultural and symbolic capital seriously, however, in ways that do not just result in the deficit model critiqued by Yosso (2005), then we need to address Young's (2008) challenge to 'bring knowledge back in'.

The critique Yosso offers from critical race theory does involve knowledge relations because, as she reminds us she reminds us, 'the knowledges of the upper and middle-classes are considered capital valuable in a hierarchical society' (Yosso 2005, 70). Considerations of the curriculum and pedagogy are not outside relations of class, therefore they are intimately and non-reductively related to it. There is a long tradition of critique of dominant knowledge

structures from the position of those who have been are excluded from making legitimate knowledge (Evans 2004). It is important to be clear, however, that there are important distinctions within the spectrum of what have been characterised as 'voice' epistemologies and, therefore, of the implications for curriculum. To simplify, there are at least three versions of 'voice' epistemologies. The first pointed out that the unacknowledged masculinist/colonial bias of much knowledge production led to bad (social) science. When newer actors and critics emerged on the scene they produced powerful critiques across the social sciences and humanities (for example, Oakley 1981), and to a lesser, but significant, extent in the sciences (for example, Fox Keller 1983). Women, and other minorities on the margins of universities, by organising collectively were able to attack the knowledge claims of the privileged and show them to be lacking, in effect producing newer, better context-independent knowledge claims. The second version was 'standpoint' theory, which in its strongest version in feminism claimed that women, by virtue of their distinctive experiences and through the development of a feminist stance, could have insights that others could not (for example, Hartsock 1998; Harding and Hintikka 1983). Truth therefore (depending on the version of standpoint theory adopted) was (partially) relativised to social group and made context dependent. This position was derived, with varying degrees of explicitness, from Lukács and his analysis of commodity fetishism, which involves a process of reification whereby social process are seen as natural facts. Exploitation is systematically masked through these operations, and this in turn allows the powerful to systematically misrecognise the source of their power and wealth; the parallel in feminist argument has been in relation to male power and privilege. In the final version of voice epistemology, 'voice' itself was deconstructed to be replaced by voices in the plural and various forms of post-modernism.

From the point of curriculum and the valuing of student resilience, the first position does so but without collapsing the context independence of knowledge, while the other two do not. Strong voice epistemologies and post-modernism are vulnerable to Moore and Muller's (1999) critique of voice and are, in their pedagogical enactments, also more likely to be vulnerable to the therapeutic critique (Ecclestone and Hayes 2008), since they tend to reduce knowledge relations to social relations. My argument, however, is that it is possible to attend to the pedagogic and the curriculum in ways which do not see less privileged students as simply lacking but value what they bring, without accepting a social constructivist (relativist) understanding of knowledge. Thus I am happy to draw on Yosso's (2005) valuable insights into community cultural capital without accepting the social constructivist implications of her argument. The sociological, historically contingent, hypothesis that newer social groups entering the field tend to bring with them new perspectives that can usefully challenge old dogma is a good reason for valuing community cultural capital and voices of newer groups, without assuming in advance that newer knowledge claims will necessarily be valid.

The work of Bernstein is helpful for understanding how new knowledge regions develop and how discipline relates to curriculum and pedagogy. In one relevant area of Bernstein's theory of educational transmission, Bernstein (2000) distinguishes between 'generic' modes and 'singulars' in terms of boundary maintenance, differentiating between those disciplines under the control of the academy (introjected) and those externally oriented:

> the performances to which they give rise are directly linked to instrumentalities of the market, to the construction of what are considered to be flexible performances … From this point of view their identity is constructed by the procedures of projection. (Bernstein 2000, 55)

Projection involves the process of regionalisation and the development of new regions where:

> Identities produced by the *new* region are more likely to face outward to the fields of practice and thus their contexts are likely to be dependent on the requirements of these fields. Identities here are what they are, and what they will become, as a consequence of the *projection* of that knowledge as practice in some context. (Bernstein 2000, 55)

The development of new regions is important for understanding the sorts of new courses that have flourished in newer and less prestigious institutions. There is much to value in Bernstein's critique; especially his fears that what we are now seeing is a dehumanising principle whereby knowledge as a commodity has become cut-off from personal commitment. This dislocation of the knower and the known, Bernstein (2000) suggests, creates conditions of crisis in terms of the very idea of education. His valuing of the singular introjected world of the disciplines is, however, problematic when seen in terms of the critique from feminists, socialists and others who ideas originated from outside the academy, which might been seen as a rather different form of regionalisation looking outwards to broader knowledge practices. This is not to deny disciplinary dynamics and challenges from within the university, but it is to argue that the challenges from newer social groups led to disciplinary innovation and that these challenges have a knowledge dimension and were not simply confined to arguments about the (ab)uses of science (for example, Oakley 1981; Fox Keller 1983). As in all these arguments, it is important to distinguish the sociological from the knowledge claims. Bernstein's (2000) analysis of the Trivium and the Quadrivium, and its resolution in Christianity through the creation of an existential self that was subsequently humanised and secularised, is important, but in developing his wider argument he ignored feminist and post-colonial critiques that exposed some of the sociological and epistemological problems of traditional disciplines. This critique does not inevitably lead to post-modernism, but it does de-stabilise the sorts of knowing-self being postulated, especially where this knowing self is un-reflexively white and male. My argument is not that all forms of disciplinary knowledge are

problematic, or indeed that all forms of feminist or post-colonial critiques are valid, but rather that in analysing the processes of regionalisation and the development of disciplines we need to bring the sociology of knowledge, and epistemological and ontological questions, into a closer relationship.

In terms of student identity and pedagogy, my key argument is that the curriculum should be one which both values community and other resources, and also one that cultivates the context independent nature of knowledge and the formation of intellectual identities as the most appropriate capitals to the higher education field. In bringing knowledge back in (Young 2008) and re-turning to issues of curriculum, higher education needs to debate more openly the values and goals that students might commit to rather than assuming the values of the ideal-typical, rational, neo-liberal man. Not debating curriculum has become a way of bracketing off considerations of the values that come with an understanding of the context independence of knowledge. Drawing on the work of Barbara Adam (Adam 2004; Adam and Groves 2007), I have argued elsewhere (Clegg 2010) that this is of immense importance when we think of the ways in which the future is already entailed in the actions of the present. A social realist epistemology is critical to the task. It is also important to remember that movements for critical pedagogy and social reform have commonly started outside the academy and recognised the irreducibly social nature of learning (Evans 2004). The interest in including those who have been excluded from university in higher education, therefore, has an epistemic as well as social dimension. Different groups of students bring diverse life experiences and outsider knowledge that often shakes up an intellectual field. While much critical pedagogy is social constructivist implicitly, if not explic-itly, my aim in differentiating voice epistemologies and in elaborating a critical realist position, which recognises both the active transitive human dimension of science (in the generic sense) as well as context independent truth claims, is to make the case that it is possible to be attentive to the insights from critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and feminism without embracing the perspectivism of social constructivism. My analysis posits the sociologi-cally contingent argument for voice and diversity, but it does not collapse ontology into epistemology.

Possible selves and agency

In policy debates about higher education in the United Kingdom there has been a tendency to treat the definition of future desirable selves as obvious, tied to a rhetoric of employability and, in debates about student financial contribution to higher education, to the obvious advantages of social mobility. Debates in Australia have operated with richer conceptions of graduate outcomes and social purpose, and in the USA, where social mission is more varied, a wider spread of values is articulated. In the United Kingdom, pedagogical technologies of the self and in particular Personal Development

Planning attempt to produce a particular sort of rational neo-liberal subject in ways which often cuts against a student's own sense of self and the lived temporalities of student life (Clegg and Bufton 2008). The cultivation of social identities for the market, however, does not redress structural inequalities. If the most significant goods of higher education are to do with knowledge relations and knowledge itself, then the curriculum is key, as are the sorts of future selves that students are asked to elaborate. These may, or may not, involve individual social mobility; for middle-class students 'staying put' is the usual outcome. The 'possible selves' literature, however, which has been largely developed in the USA and in the schools sector, does suggest that education can support the ability of students to elaborate and achieve future possible selves: 'the ability to construct a well-elaborated possible self around a particular goal—that is, the ability to envision oneself performing or having achieved the goal' (Rossiter 2003, 7). Possible selves are always embodied and social, not simply individual, and students belonging to upper-middle-class and upper-class families are more likely to envisage a possible self that includes finishing college and earning a graduate degree after college than working-class students (Segal et al. 2001). The possible selves literature, therefore, forms a link between theories based of social capital, which I have already reviewed, with more detailed insight into the mechanisms that produce student success. In exploring the nature of the futures imagined by students, the possible selves literature also opens up the space to interrogate students' own personal projects. While most students might quite reasonably aspire to personal betterment, there are also alternative visions available based on a broader understanding of the social goods of higher education and an aspiration to develop students' capabilities as agents 'able to reflect on and re-examine their valued ends … and reflect on what is of more or less ethical significance in the narrative investigation of other lives' (Walker 2008, 271).

The possible selves literature, however, while useful, comes largely from psychology and does not elaborate on the broader conditions of agency and capacities of human beings to form personal projects. One sociologist who has devoted considerable attention to the importance of theorising the concept of agency that such a vision implies is Margaret Archer (2000, 2003, 2007). She elaborates on the role of the internal conversation in a person's ability to frame and pursue their own projects and concerns, albeit on the basis of fallible judgements about their conditions of possibility. Her empirical work to date (Archer 2007) is highly suggestive, as she argues that while the evidence indicates that the internal conversation is near universal its characteristics for any individual are not. She distinguishes three forms of reflexivity and hypothesises that there may be more: communicative reflexives who through seeking validation from others in their social circle work at staying put; autonomous reflexives who are oriented towards mobility; and meta-reflexives whose value concerns mean that they act in accordance with their own values even if this is at the cost of social mobility or other penalties. Seeing student's

personal projects as important, rather than social mobility *per se*, is consistent with supporting what should be some of the values of the higher education field, not as a means to an end but as the cultivation of rounded intellectual identities that may or may not be realised as a resource for social mobility in the future. Rather, as in the case of meta-reflexives, these may involve commitments that involve the sacrifice of immediate economic self-interest. Archer's account analytically distinguishes and charts the development of the 'full range of personal powers (PEPs) – those of *self, agent, actor, and particular person*' (Archer 2000, 295, emphasis in original). Her model of personal and social identity is thus one in which individual and collective agents have the resources to act creatively in the world, thus creating conditions for transformation and change as well as social stasis. She maintains, therefore, that human beings are fundamentally evaluative in their relations with reality.

This view of persons and their personal and collective potentials, aligned to a critical realist conception of knowledge, are important resources for more adequately theorising some of the complexities set out in this paper. They are also compatible with the aims of critical pedagogy that recognise the socially as well as personally transformative potentialities of education. The rich traditions of adult, worker, and feminist education have long understood that students from non-elite background bring considerable resources with them, and that it is important not to see them as 'lacking'. In the debates about higher education, a number of conflations have taken place that make engagement with these traditions difficult. The first is the conflation of the value of higher education with social mobility. Both the student choice literature and the social mobility literature show that this equation is problematic. The second conflation is that of a lack of economic and social capital being conflated with no capital or deficit, ignoring the resilience and other forms of capital that students bring with them. The third conflation is between voice and knowing. I have argued that attending to voices of non-traditional students in higher education is perfectly compatible with a context-independent view of knowledge. Indeed the reasons outsider groups can mount compelling critiques of dominant modes is because of the knowledge claims they make. Social movements that impact on education depend on the development of what Archer (2000) calls corporate social argents, whereby actors collectively articulate values and projects that are shared and socially powerful.

Concluding reflections

This paper has pulled together literatures and ideas that are not often debated in the same place. I have tried to bring some of the literature from the USA to bear on problems that have also been debated in Australian and UK contexts. There is always the danger in such a move that real substantive and philosophical differences are elided, the very different roots of thinking about social

capital for example, and the more psychological and empirically based ideas of 'possible selves' in contrast to Archer's more sociologically elaborated theory. I have risked this approach in the hope of pointing to some shared concerns, and because I have found these theories useful to think with. I have also brought together sociological arguments about capital into relation with the debates (or more accurately non-debates) about curriculum. The tensions identified by Crozier et al. (2008; Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2010) in the forms of identities being developed in different sites raise important questions of the sorts of identities being sustained through the curriculum, as well as those produced through pedagogic practices (Bernstein 2000). Critiques of the limitations context-dependent knowledge, social constructivism, and a de-politicised version of 'voice' are important if the intellectual resources available to 'non-traditional' students particularly in non-elite sites are to be scrutinised. The shift from concerns about curriculum towards pedagogy and support may further disadvantage poorer students. This is an uncomfortable prospect for educators like me in less privileged parts of the sector; but many of the technologies designed to make access easier for students including the specification of learning outcomes and PDP may have different effects in different settings and, moreover, risk producing closed not open scripts for students (Avis 2000). Many of the suggestions in the paper are speculative and in the form of hypotheses since we have very few studies of curriculum in higher education (a silence that has been more recently remarked and beginning to be addressed), but my hope is that this paper contributes by drawing attention to these gaps. I noted in the Introduction that I was not going to offer any resolution to the dilemmas I have exposed, and I have been true to my word. Unless we ask some of these questions of higher education, however, we are likely to be guilty in colluding with mis-descriptions of the benefits of higher education for its students, of pre-judging their projects, and of reducing knowledge to social position.

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