The importance of internal conversations and reflexivity for work-based students in higher education: valuing contextual continuity and 'giving something back

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Abstract

This paper utilises the theories of Archer to explore the impact of student 'internal conversations' upon the development of reflexive approaches employed by work-based students (WBS). The study informing this paper draws on the voices of a range of WBS on a Foundation Degree in Educational Support within a new university. A range of reflexivities are identified within the strategies students employ to 'make their ways' through the often unfamiliar and sometimes alienating contexts of higher education (HE). Whilst routinisation can be viewed as in decline people are not equally placed to be liberated or to liberate themselves from structurally determined biographies. Importantly for this paper, liberation is not strongly identified by participants as a site of what they 'care most about'. It is argued in the conclusion to this paper that students have an 'empirical tendency' to employ the reflexivity that enables them to remain knowledgeably embedded to their social context, to move on but not necessarily 'out' of their social circumstances; so the autonomous reflexivity of Archer's study is less relevant to many of these students.

Introduction

Recent recommendations to government (Browne 2010: 14) continue to place emphasis upon the beneficial outcomes of HE study:

> On graduating, graduates are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next. Participation in higher education enables individuals from low-income backgrounds and then their families to enter higher status jobs and increase their earning.

Simplistic connections between participation in HE and the rewards it may bring are stated here. The participants of this small-scale qualitative research project are, in the main, mature and from low-participation groups, and have non-traditional entry criteria. They are all studying, or have recently completed, a two-year, full-time, work-based learning foundation degree (WBLFD) in education support within a new university. The particular questions to be explored in this paper are:

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(1) What form does work-based student (WBS) reflexivity take throughout aspects of the learning process and how do 'internal conversations' give insights into the types of reflexivity employed and consequent action or inaction?

(2) Do educational processes foster greater reflexivity in WBS which is supportive of transformative processes as characterised by potential for social mobility?

Policy positions learners in higher education (HE) as: '… entirely responsible for (their) own choices' (Hey and Leathwood 2009: 106). However, it has been widely documented that students are not equally '… placed at the centre of the economic and social world' (Hey and Leathwood 2009: 106) to shape their futures as they please. Neoliberal HE provision perceives of students as individualized autonomous agents most characterised by Archer's (2007, 2008) 'autonomous reflexive'. Provision is tailored toward this 'ideal type' of student, embodied by the strongest characteristics that may be identified as components of Autonomous reflexivity. The students who may be seen to gain the most from HE in terms of upward mobility as it is currently shaped are: 'selective, evaluative and elective…' (Archer 2007: 193).

This paper will explore mobility from the angle of desiring social change or, as some participants call it, 'bettering oneself', but without the express desire to move upwards and onwards. Findings here suggest an 'empirical tendency' in participants to 'give back' to existing social circumstances, model to offspring, or simply prove to themselves their own capability and increase self-belief.

Reflexivity, internal conversation and social mobility

Archer (2007, 2008) explored four forms of reflexivity through an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study which built on her earlier work. Archer (2008) explores the autonomous, communicative, meta and fractured reflexivities. She put forward that we all operate within all of these reflexivities, but that individuals tended toward a dominant mode and this might be linked to structural influences. Though some participants of this paper display a tendency toward fractured reflexivity at times, this is not a focus of the paper and so brief overviews of only the autonomous, communicative and meta reflexivities follow. Archer's theory explores the idea that we all engage in internal talk, and the way that we do this determines different courses of action or 'projects' through which we achieve our 'concerns', or the things we determine to care most about.

Autonomous reflexives engage in internal conversation alone; courses of action are defined internally and acted upon. They are more likely to operate at a distance from their social context, 'contextual discontinuity' and to have an 'empirical tendency' to be upwardly socially mobile. They

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tend to have a stronger dedication to economic and market concerns and will subordinate family and other relationships to realising their mobility goals.

Communicative reflexives engage in internal conversation which requires completion and confirmation externally before leading to courses of action. They have a greater tendency to remain connected to their social context 'contextual continuity' and to have an 'empirical tendency' toward social immobility. They tend to have a stronger dedication to family, and promotion of family and community well-being is primary. This will often result in occupational and personal sacrifice.

Meta-reflexives engage in internal conversation which tends toward scrutiny and criticism of both 'concerns' and 'projects'. Like the autonomous, they tend to operate within a form of 'contextual discontinuity'; however, the discontinuity emanates from vocational experiences which run counter to their social context, leading to 'contextual incongruity', while the autonomous reflexive utilises discontinuity to overcome constraints and increase enablements. The meta-reflexive will overcome constraints but forego enablements, leading to an 'empirical tendency' toward lateral or volatile mobility in their pursuit of 'making a difference'. The meta-reflexive's primary dedication is vocational improvement for social transformation.

Foundation degrees, reflexivity, internal conversation and social mobility

In the initial consultation process, foundation degrees (FDs) were developed with the vision of offering routes to higher qualified jobs through vocational pathways of study: 'equipping people with skills for tomorrow's jobs' (HEFCE 2000: 5). In a competitive market saturated with credentials, WBS may alternatively remain part of what Brown et al. (2008) describe as the 'low-wage' workforce. Recent changes in the wider workforce make this particularly pertinent. Shrinking occupational opportunities may call for a firmer disposition toward reflexivity more associated with patterns of upward social mobility if students are to reap the rewards of HE study, or FDs may risk offering 'false promises' in terms of economic capital (Woolhouse et al. 2009: 775). Within this research and others the accumulation of cultural capital seems to be a more secure outcome of participation upon FDs.

Policy and reports aimed at HE reform (Browne 2010, DFEE 1998, 2000, DFES 2003a, 2003b) assume that undergraduates are similarly orientated to take advantage of the increased opportunities that HE may bring. They also assume similar goals or 'concerns' (Archer 2007) associated with 'upward' patterns of mobility, which are associated with moving 'on' but also often 'out' of social circumstances or 'contexts' (Archer 2007). In a 'reflexive' and 'individualized modernity' (Beck et al. 1994, Giddens 1991), students are viewed as rational decision makers in

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charge of the direction of their biographies. Many commentators question the simplicity of this approach. In general terms, Adam and Groves (2007) problematise the notion that any of us are able to take responsibility for our futures in this way, as the pace of social life accelerates. Bourdieu (1977, 1989) relates the interplay between structure and agency, where to a large extent, the reflexive individual is oriented and orientates through 'habitus'. Skeggs draws attention to different levels of access to the reflexive self and relates this to class, which 'informs the production of subjectivity' (Skeggs 1997: 75). In previous work (Bovill 2008) I have discussed the position of Reay (2005), who outlines the 'costs' involved in psycho-social dimensions of transitional self work, and of Walkerdine (2003) and Walkerdine et al. (1999), who draw our attention to the ways that structure and agency pose limiting classificatory systems related to gender, class and generation. Archer (2007: 26) questions the whole concept of 'reflexive modernity', on one hand exploring 'the myth of cultural integration' and suggesting that even in traditional cultures, individuals have always been more reflexive than 'reflexive modernisation' arguments allow for, whilst on the other she continues to note the significance of structural differences used as: 'personal properties and powers' (Archer 2007: 36). Archer holds that the key to further understandings of differential outcomes for people in both similar and different positions is a clearer emphasis upon, and understanding of, reflexivity.

More recently, Clegg (2011: 93) has drawn upon Archer's work to explore 'the gap between the rhetoric of promised social mobility and personal advantage'. Similarly to Archer, she continues to emphasise the importance of structures in the production of the potential to develop particular types of reflexivity, stating that 'it involves a disposition towards the future based on continuous improvement and self promotion, but the acquisition and valuing of such dispositions are in turn heavily marked by inherited cultural capital and class' (Clegg 2010: 351).

Both Clegg and Archer emphasise that it is not structural positioning as such which lends an 'empirical tendency' toward upward social mobility, but the tendency of that social positioning to prioritise certain forms of reflexivity. The paper presented here finds an 'empirical tendency' toward such a relationship. Internal conversations signify the mental conversations that all individuals have with themselves. The effectiveness of such conversations to realise those things that we care about is a 'personal emergent property (PEP)' (Archer 2007: 63). Internal conversation allows individuals to fully examine their options. Internally, as opposed to externally, anything goes, offence is not taken, we may interrupt/stop/start/abandon, there are no issues of interpretation or comprehension. We can rehearse, relive and imagine; we can identify 'concerns' and come to understand the social and cultural contexts from which they emerge and to which they will be applied. We can consider and develop courses of action or 'projects', including assessment of 'constraints' and 'enablements'. We can determine what is important to us and identify practices which are more likely to bring about

satisfactory outcomes. We all engage in internal conversation; modes of reflexivity are shaped by the extent to which these are externalised and the ways in which we remain embedded in, distanced from or incongruously placed in our social contexts.

Whatever mode of reflexivity is primary, our courses of action remain fallible. The ability to re-determine further causes of action in the light of new information, to increase our personal enablements, is argued to be more highly developed in the autonomous mode, and this type of reflexivity is more likely to result in upward mobility. This paper finds a tendency toward communicative and meta reflexivity but argues that this is most useful to the participants who are not (in the main) seeking to move up or out, but rather to professionally develop so as to contribute more to family, community and self-knowledge. Through our reflexivities we are all 'radically heterogeneous'; our subjectivity is 'dynamic' and we are all more 'active' than 'passive' agents (Archer 2007: 22).

The study

As programme leader on a foundation degree in educational support in a post92 university, I have listened carefully to the voices of a range of WBS studying in years one and two of a FD (41 students in total). Various methods have been used to help increase validity, enabling the 'proposition' of findings for discussion in a situated, interpretivist sense rather than more positivist claims to 'truth' (Bridges 1999).

All 41 students from the two year groups completed a questionnaire containing both closed and open questions. This helped to establish some background data on demographic features, including age, disability status and ethnicity. Further questions were used to attempt to establish socio-economic status, both economically (Office for National Statistics n.d.) and culturally (Archer et al. 2003, Reay 2005). The overwhelming majority of students were aged over 25 (most were in their late 30s or 40s), female (only 6 of the 41 students were male) and of white British ethnicity (though a minority were from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups). Most students did not self-define as disabled, were from lower income households and were first-generation students. The majority of students entered on lower tariffs and/or vocational entry criteria. Further questions within the questionnaires helped to establish how students came to be studying on a FD; reasons for choosing this particular course; concerns they may have about the course, e.g. academic, financial, family, study or work issues; plans they had made to deal with these concerns; and what their long-term career goals were.

A smaller number of students (two from year one and two from year two) were purposively sampled (Denscombe 1998) and kept a reflective diary from September 2010 to February 2011. These students were selected based on the following criteria: they had self-defined as 'working-class', were aged between 25 and 50 (in fact, they were all in their late 30s or early 40s); were first-generation students; did not define themselves as having English as an additional language (EAL) or special educational needs (SEN); were more responsive in the open questions and had agreed to be contacted further.

In line with the university's ethical principles (BERA 2004), students' informed consent was sought. Informed consent is notoriously difficult to ascertain, and Olesen (2005) raises some primary concerns in this area. In particular, in this research, I was concerned about my position as programme leader and the potential for this to over-ride participants' possible desire to refuse consent. Concerns were also raised by the university ethics committee. This was discussed with students, who were further assured that non-participation in the research would in no way affect their participation on the course. One student consequently withdrew from the process; this student was asked to draft a short statement clarifying that they neither felt coerced to take part in or anxious about their decision to withdraw from the research. Though I am not completely happy with this as a 'solution', it serves a purpose, and I remain aware that ethics are not something only visited at the start of a project; they are contextual and situational, and call for researcher reflexivity throughout (Ryen 2011).

Analysis of data collected is ongoing, and defining the type of analysis problematic. As such, elements of many approaches can be seen here, with close alignment to 'interpretative analysis' (Rapley 2011). In particular, this stance acknowledges that our histories cannot help but affect our interpretations, but steps need to be taken to minimise researcher bias. In the case of this research, my own bias was acknowledged and reflected upon, alternative viewpoints were sought and examined, and an open outlook was maintained. I nevertheless listened to and valued my 'intuition and hunches' (Rapley 2011: 279). Experience of working with groups such as this over the past seven years has raised my awareness of the importance that these students tend to place upon family, community and traditional ties. The themes that emerged from the questionnaires particularly related to these areas (in line with contextual continuity) and were further confirmed within the reflective diaries. Every single respondent raised concerns about the impact of their study upon family members, children, partners or those they had caring responsibilities for. Students rarely mentioned concerns about achieving occupational advancement or increasing their economic gains, or clearly articulated how to plan for the next step in their career trajectory.

The areas of the questionnaires and the diaries that I have focused this research upon here include the answers given to questions about what concerns students foresaw, their plans to overcome these issues and their responses to questions about their long-term career goals. These themes were further explored in the reflective diary responses. Further confirmation of the priority that students give to family and vocational concerns, as opposed to concerns over individual advancement, the market and the economy, was found in these reflective diaries.

Vague plans, social stability and tentative hopes

Students upon this FD can be seen to begin their learning journeys in a haphazard manner, characterised by vague plans that are often associated with a 'warranted trust' (Archer 2007: 160) in the opinions of their 'familiars' and 'similars' (Archer 2007: 84–85) who have previously trodden the same path. The haphazard way in which students begin their university journey is characterised as follows. Students' application and enrolment upon this FD can be largely demonstrated to be 'last-minute'. Despite running open days and marketing the course early in the preceding academic year, late entry to the programme, from July toward the end of September is not at all unusual.

When students were asked what research they carried out in determining their (usually late) decision to join the FD, it was found that only some had accessed information on the internet and very few students in all year groups had visited other universities. Most students heard of this FD through word of mouth from friends and colleagues or through leaflets at work; this may be associated with a communicative approach, where their '"contextual continuity" represents a major resource' (Archer 2007: 85). In reality, it was the only university or course that most students considered.

In response to question three of the questionnaire, 'what concerns do you have about this course', there was a range of replies, including worry about student loans and debt; the ability of their workplace to offer continued mentor support; the stability of their current employment; academic capability and, for most, a deep sense of having committed to something they considered well beyond their ability. What was present in every single response was a strong sense of worry about how their family would cope and how they would maintain their current levels of commitment to their family members. Their concerns included 'not giving enough of my time to my family'; 'still having quality time with my husband'; 'husband and daughters understanding the amount of time I will be studying at home' and 'being able to keep up with all the work I have and my son's homework'; and one respondent stated that '[I] don't want this to dominate my life and not leave me with enough time to enjoy my family' (years one and two questionnaire responses).

These five quotes represent only a small proportion of such responses, which are strongly aligned with the communicative reflexives' 'self investment in the family' (Archer 2008a: 1). I argue that this investment in the family takes precedence over the investment in pursuing socially upward mobility. It may represent an 'empirical tendency' toward social immobility or as Archer (2007: 166) stated to weaken '…long-term planning in favour of waiting upon contingency, and ultimately leading agents themselves actively to reduce their ambitions'.

Question four asked 'what have you planned to deal with any of these issues'. Many respondents left this blank, or replied along the lines of 'I haven't thought about that yet'. There were some more autonomous responses, such as 'have a timetable for studying' and 'told work I cannot do extra hours'. Many responses continued the focus upon family first and study after: 'Allocate myself time to study when the children are at school' was a 'typical' reply. Further responses continued to represent close communication with the family network and the need to externalise projects in the 'thought and talk' mode of communicative reflexivity: 'discussed with children' (with nothing formulated from this); 'have asked close members of the family to help'; 'asked for extra help and support from family when I can'.

In response to the final question analysed here, question eight, 'what are your long term plans', where this was answered, a vague and tentative form of planning was expressed. This demonstrates '[confinement of] planning to the immediate' and an inability to 'design an occupational project' (Archer 2007: 167–172). In this question I used the term 'plan' very specifically, and when handing out the questionnaire I spoke with the students, explaining that some specific examples of plans would be useful to this research. Very few of the 41 responses gave any specific details of the steps they would need to take to fulfil goals related to long-term career plans. There was no strong sense displayed by students that they had come to university with any formulated plan to move toward career goals and achieve upward social upward mobility. Answers such as 'I may go onto postgraduate study but am not completely sure' display no real understanding of the steps to be taken from year one toward the reality of this outcome. 'Becom[ing] a primary school teacher' was regularly cited by students, but with little or no indication of the expected route toward this goal. These students predominantly come from the primary school sector, and this presented as an almost 'default' automatic answer to go in this space. Another common type of answer was of the 'not sure' variety, signifying a form of 'presentism' (Archer 2007: 171) where plans for the future were absent.

In these responses projects are not demonstrated as clearly defined upon entry or during study; nevertheless, most of the students 'make their way' through the programme of study. Though

this research has not formally followed up these responses so far, the group from which the responses have been drawn are currently either deciding on progression to the year three top-up or considering and activating postgraduate concerns and projects.

They are all tired and study-weary at the end of the academic year. I have had many conversations and tutorials with these students in recent weeks where the subject of 'external conversation' has focused upon their progression decisions. Many of these students have anecdotally spoken about their unease and indecision about year three. This lends some weight to the research, indicating that these students are predominantly working within a communicative reflexivity where they are struggling 'to see far enough ahead to design a project to which [they] can commit [themselves]' (Archer 2007: 171).

For the year two students now moving on to year three, the most common advice I have given recently is: 'if you complete the FD successfully then you have a right to progress, so why don't you put in your application and if you really don't want to return, you can withdraw in September'. This might seem a slightly negative way to engage with students; however, while I know that most of these students will return (historically they do), this 'get out clause' seems to align with the communicative reflexivity they display. I feel that at this stage, students have completed the two-year FD and are in many cases temporarily in need of an escape route: 'sooner or later, these communicative reflexives wonder how to climb back down the ladder which they had mounted without any plan in mind' (Archer 2007: 170–171).

I think most will not 'climb down', but this offers a calm space through which they can engage with their 'familiars' and 'similars' (Archer 2007: 170– 171) to test their mettle and shore themselves up to return next year. I do not offer understandings of this from a purely theoretical viewpoint or within my own professional context. I understand this because it is the same path I trod as a 'less-traditional' under- and postgraduate. I constantly struggled with whether to return or not each year and I turned to my own network of 'familiars' and 'similars' to help me make these decisions. For this and many other reasons, I consequently regard myself as a predominantly communicative reflexive.

The final analysis of collected data that I will discuss here relates to the postgraduate decisions of a current year three student who kept a reflective diary for this research. She demonstrates all three forms of reflexivity, and even at times elements of Archer's 'fractured reflexivity', where internal conversations can be seen to 'temporarily increase distress' (Archer 2007: 93). I draw upon this last account as it offers a real sense of the 'radically heterogeneous',

'dynamically subjective', 'active' agency (Archer 2007: 93) that is the hallmark of every one of the participants of this study.

> Went to my niece's graduation party today. A massive occasion for my family. My niece is the first person to get a degree and she did really well, a 2:1. My girls dropped me in it when my sister-in-law was talking to them. 'You two will be next'. They then told her that 'Actually it would be me'. So embarrassing. My brother and sister-in-law have no idea what I'm doing. They know I'm doing 'a course' but no more than that. Had to make what felt like a huge confession in a huge group of people. Still get really embarrassed to admit that I'm doing this now…

> The next thing that happens is the inevitable question. 'What will you do with this when you're done?' I'm not totally sure of this myself. (Year two student diary entry, November 2010)

The student's sense of her entitlement simply to be at university is intensely fragile (Crozier et al. 2009, Waller et al. 2011) at this stage in her educational trajectory, despite high academic achievement. The reflexivity being displayed throughout this student's internal conversations is complex, tied up with family history and future, and belies the later socially upward mobility this student is now demonstrating in her postgraduate 'project'. Only one month later the same student displays much greater resilience in a further statement which signifies more of an autonomously reflexive account of where she is at in university.

> Got my results back today. Bit disappointed got 67%. This time last year would probably be happy with that but having gone out on a high at the end of year one, I am disappointed. At least this year I feel much better placed to dust myself down and get on with the next one. Don't intend to get less than 70% again, no matter what it takes. (Diary entry, December 2010)

This student is now finishing year three and will be leaving with a very secure first class honours. She is going on to begin a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE). This means she will need to leave her current employment, where she is a long standing Support Assistant. She will need to begin study with a whole new group of students, most of whom will be much younger than her (she is in her 40s). Of the few students from this FD who do progress to postgraduate study, most try to opt for school-based routes of teacher education, as it allows them to stay within the familiarity of their current employment. In conversation with this student, she actively sought the PGCE route in an autonomously reflexive mode which was 'selective', 'evaluative' and 'elective' (Archer 2007: 193). She has identified that she wants to move into different educational settings to increase her range of experience. She understands that the PGCE programme is often more transferable if she moves location, and would also like to meet new students and take on new challenges. All of this is

indicative of the autonomous reflexive. Yet I know that she has talked this through with her 'familiars' and 'similars' and I also know that her family remains her prime concern, as displayed in the diary entry below and also reiterated in later conversational conduct with myself and her peers.

> Wow!!! Sophie just got an offer from Birmingham uni, so proud. She of course just takes it all in her stride. She has always expected to go to uni so it's no big deal to her, just the next step on the ladder. Just needs to work her little socks off to get the grades. Hope that I can give her all the support she deserves whilst studying myself. Would rather sacrifice my dreams than not support her if she needs me. (Diary entry, December 2010)

This student's daughter is now securely following her own dreams and pursuing a law degree. I know that her mother is exceptionally proud of her and perhaps also feels that she has been a role model to her daughter. She is only now beginning to feel a sense of ease that she can follow a pathway that she did not plan, but vaguely and tentatively hoped for during her study. She is demonstrating an autonomous and communicative reflexivity in her choices. I do not believe that she is yet displaying a dominant autonomous stance, and if her daughter suddenly needed her it is very likely that she would change her plans if required. The communicative mode and subordination of her own dreams to her family's wellbeing is still in clear evidence in this student's current conversations with me and with her 'familiars' and 'similars'.

Some final thoughts, or 'internal conversations' of my own

Participants' accounts tend toward the communicative and sometimes the metareflexive. Often, students' lives are such that 'selective', 'evaluative' and 'elective' choices and planning are less possible and 'presentism' more rational (Archer 2007). So, for example, students may make quick and last-minute decisions to come to university, but their levels of commitment once participating are generally very high. Students may make late decisions regarding progression or postgraduate routes but this may be a conscious and rational choice which enables them to cope with the stage at which they currently find themselves and balance family, work and study. Last-minute decision-making may be a useful informed strategy to avoid intense personal distress, as late decisions leave less time to consider the 'what ifs' or to back out of unfamiliar pathways. This can be viewed as an active strategy employed by the communicative or meta reflexive to move themselves forward into unfamiliar territory whilst maintaining their 'contextual continuity' and coping with 'contextual incongruity'.

Programmes of study that engage with those less prepared for university, or the 'less traditional' student, may need to recognise that for many of these students, their primary focus

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when beginning their study is quite clearly not aligned with neoliberal educational policy. Most of these students do not come to HE study with a clearly defined pathway toward individual advancement, where 'projects' are clearly derived to attain a 'concern' of upward social mobility. Whilst study, for these students, is most often very seriously considered, how much of themselves they have to give in terms of physical time and emotional space is likely to take a haphazard approach. The amount they expect from those who support them in their educational journeys is quite likely to be high in terms of time and emotion.

Many of these students will choose to remain actively embedded in their social contexts, and throughout their studies, what they 'care most about' will continue to be the well-being of their families and communities. Most often these students will continue to prioritise their investments in their families, their communities and their social networks, and this will impact on the way in which they study. It will most probably continue to mean that these students require both flexibility and stability in programmes of study. They will have stops and starts in their educational journeys as well as ups and downs in their commitment. The resources they can share with the greedy spheres of family and study will wax and wane.

HE institutions currently tend to be set up to attract those students who plan to move up and on: policy positions them as such. Many 'less traditional' students may also have plans for mobility, but this mobility may be concerned less with liberation from their social contexts than with contribution toward them. Such students are likely to remain contextually embedded or incongruently positioned and may have quite different support needs to the upwardly mobile, market-driven student. Provision within HE for the student who actively chooses to make their 'concerns' more about social cohesion, stability or solidarity, or what they can 'give back', might acknowledge some of the following themes in planning provision to help them formulate 'projects'. The seven themes which I identify here are, I feel, professionally, theoretically and culturally important to consider. All of these proposals require time and effort but, most crucially in this time of HE change, also economic resources and cultural shifts.

(1) Attracting WBS students and persuading them of the cultural, social and economic benefits of continuing to invest in their vocational development. If universities wish to continue to attract this student base then a different recruitment strategy is needed. Students enrol predominantly through word of mouth information sources, their 'familiars' and 'similars' and through processes of 'warranted trust'. The huge shift in university funding has affected this group's potential to engage with HE, although it was historically challenging even prior to this. Universities need to develop outreach work which understands this. Therefore, collaborating

with existing students to 'spread the word' is useful. Leaflets about open days often go 'unread' or, more usually, do not make it through to the potential student, as 'gatekeepers', such as heads of schools and other senior staff, sometimes have a vested interest in keeping their staff underqualified and cheap to employ. This requires either bypassing such gatekeepers or working with receptive gatekeepers to disseminate the availability of courses for WBS. University staff who understand the anxieties and potential barriers that WBS may 'concern' themselves with need to sensitively convey strong 'myth-busting' messages. They need to be able to convey that courses for WBS exist; that there is often financial assistance and, if there is not, to explain the loan system clearly; that these courses often recognise different qualifications for entry; and that the types of students on such courses are often 'familiar' and 'similar'. Assurances that the prospective student's work experience will be valued and that they can be enabled to 'give back' to their workplace through professional development and a more secure knowledge base gained through these programmes are important. This will require three things, at least: for these courses to survive the current overhaul of HE; for universities to allow extra work allocation to programme staff in order for them to carry out such time-heavy work; and for staff to be knowledgeable about the needs of this student group and willing to move outside of the HE space to convey this message in places of employment, colleges and other appropriate spaces, such as community centres. Utilising former and present students to help in this outreach work would be fundamental; this would require training and recognition of their contribution through payment for their time and expertise.

(2) Once students apply, work needs to be done to prepare them for study and to get them through the door. Open days/pre-study skills days/induction days need to continue. They need to be attractive to students who are 'less prepared' for HE, so for example may need to be separated from general information and guidance (IAG) days. The content needs to be mindful of what would attract or deter such students. It is very important to have these regular points of contact up to entry so that WBS' anxieties can be managed, making their eventual enrolment more likely. The importance of students having opportunities to mix with their fellow students prior to this is key in building 'warranted trust'. Utilising former students to collaborate in activities that enable this and make the HE environment seem more familiar and viewed as potentially able to be part of the students' cultural life will help ease 'concerns'. This may result in students being less likely to 'climb back down the ladder' before they have even stepped on the first rung.

(3) Organised yet flexible programmes of study. Timetables and assignments need to be given in advance, and changes need to be minimal. Care needs to be taken over the setting of

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assignments——perhaps they could be aligned with study weeks. Support needs to be increased for students in time leading up to assignments and innovative approaches such as 'real time' electronic support employed. Students who have a tendency to prioritise their existing 'contexts' need new contexts, such as HE, to fit into their lives. These students have less space to reorganise the already time consuming arenas of family and work. If it comes to a decision between family, work or study, then the victim will most likely be study.

(4) Knowledgeable and empathetic staff who understand the limits of their support and can refer and defer. Staff need to have a knowledge of the specific needs that some of this group may have——for example, the ability to sympathise yet offer practical advice to the student who has been up all night with children, or preoccupied with work commitments, can be as valuable as academic support. Skilful academic support also needs to be delivered as an integral part of WBS programmes. This high level of support can become physically and emotionally draining upon staff; if this occurs, it is not useful for staff or student. Clear indication of the available support needs to be provided from the start of the programme. Who is responsible for what type of support needs to be evident and areas where the student can be proactive identified. Staff need to be able to refer students to more specialised support where appropriate and to delegate tasks to those they are appointed to. For example, it needs to be clear who students seek academic support from, who they seek pastoral support from and ultimately what the limits of this are. From the start, students often need extensive scaffolding simply just to become students. This needs to be delivered in a skilful manner, with the intention of building resilience and independence in students to operate within this new environment more independently as quickly as possible.

(5) Peer support sessions to tap into the often more communicative nature of WBS. It is useful to consider alternative viewpoints and to draw on the varied capital that students with wide experience of the working world bring to their studies. This specifically allows for students to work with their 'familiars' and 'similars' and recognises the very real strength of the informal support structures set up by students, such as online forums and Facebook groups. It has been noted by students that these sites go 'viral' around assignment writing time. It would be unwise for academics to tap into existing student forums such as this, but expanding these informal practices in more formal ways within the delivery of teaching and learning would be a way to tap into the already existing potential.

(6) Occupational and post-graduate support needs to be more specific to WBS. Careers guidance in HE is often more aligned with students who are newer to the world of work. This

support needs to be built into relevant areas of programmes of study to recognise the time constraints upon WBS. This needs to be augmented by clear and flexible post-graduate routes to give students increased opportunities to blend work, study and family and to continue their professional development. This may go some way to alleviating the potential of the 'communicative' to 'work at getting stuck' and the tendency of the 'meta-reflexive' to prioritise lateral rather than upward mobility (Archer 2007). If postgraduate education was able to allow for continuing professional development (CPD) whilst students remained within their existing vocational communities, they might be enabled to gain the further qualifications necessary for them to take that 'upward' step within their existing networks. Often it is that leap after graduation that 'enables' mobility, but remains so elusive to most of these students. So, for example, gaining the teaching qualification moves them from unqualified teacher to qualified teacher and the security and mobility that goes with this role. One current year-three student has been working at the level of a teacher for many years, and the responsibility she takes on is comparable to that level, but her remuneration remains below this standard. She has recently asked for a pay rise, requesting to be paid per annum instead of pro-rata, without holiday pay. She was granted just three weeks' extra pay. She knows that her unqualified status offers her no job security——so if, for some reason, she needed to leave her current school, where she has developed many years of expertise in mental health specialism, she would be unlikely to secure the same sort of work as an unqualified teacher elsewhere. She will not move toward qualifying as a teacher as she cannot train in her current special school and would therefore have to leave it. She is clear that she will not renege on her commitments to the other staff, the children and her community in this way. She has a deep commitment to the community in which she works and the desire to stay there and 'give back' was a primary reason for starting university. A positive example of collaboration between a student and her workplace can be seen in the following example of another current year three student involved in this research. She is highly invested in her workplace and strongly connected to her peers on the course, as in the mode of the 'communicative' or 'meta-reflexive'. Despite having complex surgery recently, she worked very hard from home to complete her programme of study rather than deferring. In her own words, she was 'determined to graduate with her friends'. She is very ill currently and about to undergo six months of treatment at home, which means she is not allowed to go into work. She has been given a laptop and is currently monitoring her staff team as well as she can from home. She has put together a clear programme of development for the member of staff who she is (reluctantly) allowing to take over her responsibilities in her absence. The student is presently a highly experienced senior support worker who is responsible for a team of staff and oversees

most of the SEN and behaviour provision informally. In terms of her postgraduate development, she is being strongly supported by her place of work to follow a school-based route to her teaching qualification now that she is about to graduate. This is with the explicit intention that they will then give her the time out of work that she needs to pursue her Masters qualification in special education needs, although she will have to finance this. Last year they also allowed her to sit her missing GCSEs with the students in the school so that she could build to this route of further training. This is, in my experience, unusual; however, it is a very good example of the possible results of closer collaboration between the university, the workplace and student/staff expertise to benefit all concerned. This recognises and works with the reflexivities of these students. It is directly tapping into the benefits to be reaped from strong 'contextual continuity' displayed by the 'communicative reflexive' and the vocational desire to 'give something back' inherent in the 'meta-reflexive'.

(7) Movement from a deficit approach of teaching and learning to a collaborative approach.
Within HE, the idea that academics disseminate knowledge to a less knowledgeable population underpins much delivery of teaching and learning. Students come to university because they have something they wish to learn and specialists from whom they hope to gain new knowledge. This model continues to hold water with WBS, who note how the theory they learn in university now underpins the practices they were involved in all along. They also regularly comment that the space to consider their practice which they have at university is one of the most valuable aspects of their study. However, if work-based programmes of study do not recognise the very wide range of experience they often have in any one cohort of students, a crucial resource is being missed. I have been speaking with the year-three students recently and their range of experience is vast, often outstripping the knowledge of some lecturing staff. We have long-standing, highly professional family co-ordinators, child protection specialists, behaviour support strategists and a number of people with high levels of skill and knowledge in various areas of disability. Lesson delivery needs to begin to more fully encompass this wide range of experience. We are currently considering bringing former students back to deliver lessons after graduation.

The responses of HE structures are dependent upon policy developments, financial constraints, the demands of the economy and HE value systems in relation to who they regard HE to be for and what they regard HE to be. Much of what the Browne Review (2010) and the recent white paper on HE (2011) explores assumes a more 'traditional' student with 'traditional' entry criteria, who is making personal decisions free from the constraints of family and caring responsibilities; who is able to put their studies first and is unencumbered by the 'baggage' of their personal history. I would suggest this is a redundant view of any student, but particularly of WBS.

Students in this study display, more than other forms of reflexivity, a communicative approach to their studies. They are intensely 'thoughtful' about their studies. They spend much time assessing their experiences and engaging in discussion of the impact of their educational journeys. I feel that work-based programmes of study need to draw out and highlight the skills and qualities that these students are already displaying in their capacity to hold down responsible jobs, raise families, maintain and usually improve their educational attainment, meet deadlines, offer each other immense support networks, complete programmes of study and, even if it is often last-minute, move on to the next stage. In short, these students deal with and get on with the many crises of life which they experience along the way. I think support might be best positioned in terms of illuminating that students already possess many of the qualities associated with a highly 'reflexive' approach and draw on the qualities of the autonomous, communicative and meta-reflexive, but with the latter two prioritised because of their connections to their social contexts. These reflexive approaches should not be viewed as negative or weak in disposition, but as strengths. Workbased programmes of study will need to identify ways in which they can work with rather than against 'contextual continuity' in challenging economic times if WBS' interests are to continue to be met.

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