

Why do some Access to Higher Education students
embrace Critical Pedagogy whilst others resist?

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REFLECTIVE STATEMENT

Reflecting on my time on the Doctoral (EdD) programme, I can honestly say it has been a challenging, stimulating and worthwhile journey. During this time I have made substantive progress in developing my thinking, analysis, reflection and understanding of my own professional practice and research questions that I wanted to pursue. It is a pleasure to have completed my final thesis and I view this as the culmination of a personal journey. At times it has been challenging and both work and personal circumstances have influenced possible progress, requiring a great deal of perseverance. Nevertheless, there have been many epiphany moments along the way and professionally speaking I am very satisfied with my achievements.

Drawing on themes that have emerged throughout the EdD programme, my professional concern is that critical pedagogical practices are increasingly resisted by Access to Higher Education students. This is a concern that has remained with me during this time and I have been able to explore through engagement with relevant theoretical perspectives and professional and academic literature. The four taught modules served as an excellent foundation for the research I was to undertake and informed my thinking concerning epistemological questions I wanted to pursue. On reflection, I can see real progress and continuity between different elements of the EdD programme and they have been extremely valuable in developing my academic writing and professional voice.

The Foundations of Professionalism in Education and Contemporary Education Policy modules provided me with an intellectual framework in which I could locate and problematise the professional concerns I wanted to investigate¹. Furthermore, Methods of Enquiry 1 & 2 enabled me to explore different research methods, supporting methodology and implications of researching one's own practice.

The Foundations of Professionalism in Education module provided theoretical insights and epistemological positions from which to explore what it means to be a 'professional'. Thinking critically about the different, and sometimes competing, theoretical perspectives on the nature of professionalism, I questioned how these might apply within my own educational setting and inform my research questions. Specifically, I developed a deeper understanding and appreciation concerning how recent educational policies may work against Critical Pedagogy (CP) and any emancipatory intentions I might have. This was challenging for me, because I realised that any attempt to reinvigorate or reformulate teacher professionalism or pedagogical approaches (critical or otherwise) would necessitate acknowledging the conflicting contexts within which practitioners work.

The Contemporary Education Policy module provided me with an opportunity to revisit and think more critically when developing a conceptual framework as a way of interrogating and analysing policy in relation to my research problem. I found the reading and writing for this module extremely stimulating when thinking about progressive practices in my own setting.

¹ Initial Specialist Course - there were a number of options available.

Developing a greater understanding concerning the context within which policy is made and the way policy slippages, distortion and subversion sometimes provide the spaces in which CP can occur was fascinating.

In my own institution I deliver a module within our teacher training programme (Widening Professional Practice) and both modules have given my teaching a real edge². Undoubtedly, I have become more reflective about my own learning and the learning of others. Indeed, utilising current research within my own writing and professional practice has been both challenging and stimulating.

Research undertaken in Methods of Enquiry 1 & 2 were interrelated and provided me with an opportunity to prepare and outline a proposal for a small-scale research project. Consequently, I have been able to incorporate more sophisticated reflective qualities into my professional work. The modules were useful as a way of exploring the theoretical field in which my research would be undertaken, providing the opportunity for developing a greater understanding concerning research themes and methodology.

Formative and summative feedback for Methods of Enquiry 1 suggested more attention was required concerning my rationale in relation to existing literature and broader epistemological concerns I had. Moreover, I needed to get a more 'critical edge' concerning what constitutes 'empowerment'. I had also been a little too presumptuous that 'others' would share my progressive and emancipatory visions. Nevertheless, the feedback was invaluable and I was able to address these issues more thoroughly in Methods of Enquiry 2.

² We are a satellite provider of teacher training programmes for the University of Greenwich and I teach the Widening Professional Practice (WPP) module on the Diploma of Teaching in the Life Long Learning Sector (DTLLS).

In particular, drawing on the work of critical, feminist and post-structuralist feminist writers has been insightful for rethinking notions of CP and empowerment in terms of the claims it makes for itself. I was also able to look more deeply at my research design, scrutinising more closely the limitations, ethics and power relations involved in using my students as a sample group. Undertaking focus group interviews in *Methods of Enquiry 2* heightened my understanding concerning many of the practicalities and limitations of what I was trying to investigate. Although a much better piece of work, there were still limitations in terms of generating useful 'analytical' categories and 'implications for practice'. These were issues I had to consider as my research progressed and although challenging, it prepared me for work I would undertake in my Institution Focused Study (IFS) and final thesis. Taken together, both modules helped me develop a more critical and nuanced stance to research and think more clearly concerning investigating my own setting. They also provided an excellent introduction to literature in the field.

The nature of my research problem was complex and designing an appropriate research framework has been a challenge throughout the EdD programme. Researching students within my institution who do not share the same position as my own was also problematic. I frequently reflected on how I could formulate a sound methodological framework for investigating my professional concerns and the challenges of being an insider-researcher. My IFS proposal, whilst considered 'carefully and honourably written', raised a number of practical and ethical issues concerning ethnographic practice and how I would address these throughout the study.

Taking my supervisors' advice, I drew on feminist and post-structuralist literature as a way of addressing the pitfalls concerning researching one's own setting and ethical issues that might arise.

On reflection, the strength of the IFS was in providing a way of bringing the taught elements of the EdD programme together and the opportunity to undertake a larger piece of research. Summative feedback received was generally very positive and my research approach was deemed as 'fit-for-purpose'. Indeed, I was pleased that literature I had engaged with throughout the various modules was more skilfully deployed and made my writing more persuasive. I have always responded to feedback in a positive way (even when not necessarily good news) and incorporated as a way of developing scholarship. I believe this is a disposition that has served me well throughout the programme and will continue to do so in the future.

As I embarked on the final thesis I was developing a better understanding concerning ethics and power relations in relation to the epistemological questions I was investigating. I also recognised more fully that, whether consciously or unconsciously, I could not remain neutral in relation to my research interests: the personal, political and my own professional biography would require consideration. In this respect, developing a more reflexive stance throughout the IFS provided an appropriate foundation for my research.

Submitting a robust thesis proposal was important and it was generally well received. However, there were still minor adjustments to be made concerning my methodological approach and use of additional literature to strengthen my final study.

I engaged with the various recommendations and on reflection, am glad I integrated them because they helped me think about the direction of my research and possible obstacles that might lie ahead.

A distinctive set of themes emerged from my IFS and although I had started to address student resistances to CP, I had arrived at something of an intellectual cul-de-sac, my professional concerns unanswered. Refining and identifying issues previously not considered and formulating new questions that might inform the research process was crucial. I felt that part of the problem was a methodological weakness in that I had only partially adapted the methodological framework (Voice Centred Relational method - VCR), as a way of translating the interrelatedness of student narratives into concrete methods of data analysis. Having used only *two* of the *four* strands available I needed to deepen my analysis. In my thesis I have utilised all four strands, analysing a series of dialogues with students (through unstructured conversations) which helped me develop three distinct narrative themes.

Using the VCR four-strand approach as a way of reading the unstructured conversations, provided an insightful way of getting at the various feelings and orientations students expressed in relation to significant others and wider societal concerns. It also addressed many of the issues raised in *Methods of Enquiry 2* and IFS, providing a more equitable approach to research relationships and acknowledging differences between the researcher and the researched.

Although my methodological framework did provide a way of analysing student narratives I can honestly say it was a stimulating but time-consuming process. This was something I had not fully acknowledged until the process was underway.

Listening to and transcribing the various narratives was a herculean task requiring considerable patience and persistence. Nevertheless, the hard work was worthwhile and some interesting themes emerged, providing considerable insights into why Access to HE students might resist CP.

The challenge however, lay in making sense of and integrating data in such a way it could inform my professional practice and be of use for other practitioners. Time and again, I asked myself what value it would have for a wider community of practice. My hope is that in disseminating any findings, I will generate more interest concerning how critical teaching practices can be re-envisioned in a challenging educational terrain. Indeed, having spent a considerable period of time on my thesis researching a professional concern, I am determined to do something with it rather than let it 'gather dust' on a shelf. Having already discussed my research work with the Open College Network South East Region (OCNSER), I intend to give a paper at their forthcoming regional forum and conference, making more regular contributions in the future. This is really important because I do not want to stop reading, writing and researching and intend to take my work further in the future.

I believe that one of the most important things about the EdD programme and working towards completing this thesis has been developing a deeper understanding of the research process and the contribution this has made to my professional practice. I do not want to overstate my progress, but during this time I have grown in confidence (immensely so) both as a research-practitioner and intellectually. My working life has changed as I progressed and the academic work undertaken has informed my professional role.

I have also undergone a number of promotions within my organisation including leading the Access to HE and post-compulsory teacher training programmes.

Of course, as I reflect back on my thesis I know that 'if I had to do it all again', there would be a number of issues I would take into consideration. Whilst undertaking this study it has become clear to me that a shorter length EdD thesis imposes certain restrictions and required difficult decisions concerning what I would include or omit. On a more practical level, it has been challenging, balancing work and academic studies; it has not been easy in terms of finding the time to read, write and think more critically.

Thinking ahead, I do want to continue to pursue the kinds of pedagogical issues and struggles raised in my research, because I know they will remain of professional concern. My hope is that completing the EdD will provide the catalyst for further research and although inescapably challenging, it is an endeavour worth undertaking.

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Abstract

Why do some Access to Higher Education (HE) students embrace Critical Pedagogy (CP) whilst others resist? I have considered this question throughout my time on the Doctoral (EdD) programme and it has been at the heart of my academic work. Drawing on themes that have emerged during this time, including work undertaken in my Institution Focused Study (IFS), my professional concern is that, increasingly, attempts to operationalise CP in the classroom either misfire or fail - a pedagogical stalling. My experience is that students frequently misunderstand, resist or are ambivalent towards my critical intentions. I am concerned that critical pedagogues may under-theorise the contingent nature of classroom life and individual subjectivity. Whilst feminist and feminist post-structuralist writers acknowledge the situated and contingent nature of learners' subjectivity and deconstruct the nature of oppression and extent of teachers' agency to pursue CP, it remains largely a political project, abstracted from the daily realities of classroom life.

Neo-liberal educational discourses increasingly undermine critical approaches and are sometimes experienced as superfluous and anachronistic by students. Given these difficulties the purpose of this thesis is to develop a more nuanced understanding of students' pedagogical perceptions. Drawing on ethnographic and collaborative research approaches, I explore narrative accounts of Access students progressing from Further Education (FE) to Higher Education (HE). Using unstructured conversations and the Voice Centred Relational (VCR) method of analysis, I problematise misperceptions concerning my critical intentions.

The students' narratives are developed as three distinct themes and acknowledge constraints concerning student subjectivity. The study concludes by arguing that critical pedagogues should pay greater attention to the relational conditions from which students speak. I consider what a more contextually informed pedagogy might look like: one that acknowledges the real constraints of student subjectivity, the nature of oppression and the demands of neo-liberal policy-drivers. Finally, I suggest an alternative and more nuanced approach to CP offers a more situated and contingent way forward.

PREFACE

In *Chapter One* I outline why CP is important for me, its professional relevance and how it informs this thesis and my guiding research questions are also stated. I then define what I mean by the terms pedagogy and critical pedagogy and consider why pedagogical modes of address, sometimes either misfire or fail to connect with students. In doing so, I say something concerning my passion for critical practices, the changing nature of students and my commitment to the Access movement.

I say more about the rationale and professional concerns underpinning my research problems in *Chapter Two* and give an overview of the Access movement, its purpose and emancipatory vision. I also outline what a critical classroom might look like and some of the pedagogical approaches I use. Finally, increasingly concerned about the productive possibilities of my own agency, I problematise the growth of grading and credentialism within Access programmes and its impact on students' identity and dispositions towards learning.

In *Chapter Three*, I consider the literature informing my research question, epistemological position and methodical framework used. Drawing on feminist and post-structuralist feminist discourses, I then problematise their practicability for use in the classroom and discuss some of the limitations to operationalising CP. These include individual subjectivity, the situated and contingent nature of identity and what this might mean for the critical pedagogue.

Neo-liberal changes in the policy terrain are discussed in *chapter Four* and the relationship between student identity and an increasingly commodified educational landscape is considered.

Reverberating with issues concerning grading and credentialism, I consider if these changes render CP anachronistic and whether I retreat to more traditional pedagogical approaches.

In *Chapter Five* I explore epistemological positions underpinning my methodological framework. I consider practical and ethical concerns that might potentially have arisen and how I responded to these throughout the research process. In particular, I reflect on questions concerning power, voice and the value of reflexivity. An overview is provided of the Voice Centred Relational method (VCR) to analyse a series of dialogues with students (through unstructured conversations) and how this was helpful in developing a set of distinct narrative themes.

The problem of power in research relationships is considered in this *Chapter Six*. Putting reflexivity at the heart of careful reading and re-reading of the various narratives, I reflect on the difficulties in attempting to represent often marginalised groups.

My research findings and discussions are presented in *Chapters Seven* as three distinct narrative themes. They are then discussed in relation to professional concerns at the heart of my research, reflecting on what it might mean for students and critical practitioners.

Finally, in *Chapter Eight*, I consider the value of my EdD thesis, how it has contributed to my professional practice and what my research might mean for a community of practice. I then offer some concluding comments concerning the limitations of my study and consider potential directions for further research.

CHAPTER 1 - WHY Critical PEDAGOGY (CP) IS IMPORTANT FOR ME - ITS PROFESSIONAL RELEVANCE AND HOW IT INFORMS THIS THESIS

In this introductory chapter I shall outline my research question and rationale for undertaking this thesis. Drawing on and problematising research work already undertaken throughout the EdD programme, I explain why Critical Pedagogy (CP) is important for me and its professional relevance. I will also define what I mean by the terms pedagogy and critical pedagogy and clarify how they are used in this thesis. I place and contextualise my own biography and commitment to the Access movement. In doing so, I say something concerning my passion for critical practices, the changing nature of Access students and the productive possibilities of CP. Although my discussion is in more depth in Chapter Two, I touch upon recent changes in education policy and literature and their possible influence on both students and practitioners.

As a practitioner-researcher this thesis reflects my professional concern in wanting to develop a greater understanding of why some Access to Higher Education (HE) students embrace Critical Pedagogy (CP) whilst others resist. It is an emerging sense of restlessness and self-doubt that has motivated me to take a closer look at my critical teaching practices and scrutinise them more closely. When I talk about why some students embrace CP whilst others resist, my concern is that whilst many Access students still welcome the opportunity to engage with CP, others are less responsive and increasingly more likely to resist. Whilst the former enjoy classroom activities and are engaged throughout, the latter are more likely find participating in critical discussions and activities more difficult.

For example, when I encourage students to critically examine and question knowledge which is taken for granted and experiences of the world, this can engender discomfort both individually and throughout the classroom. As a critical practitioner I experience resistance to progressive practice as a pedagogical misfiring or failing to connect with students and find this frustrating (Felman, 1982, 1987; Ellsworth, 1997). Previously, I felt students embarking on the Access programme were more likely to welcome and engage with pedagogical approaches that question the status quo and call for social change. However, this seems to be changing and it feels as if students increasingly favour traditional pedagogical approaches over more critical ones. Teaching social sciences I find that one way or another, my subject matter is concerned with social justice and inequity.

Whilst this matters to some, others are less comfortable and even though many students welcome my subject matter and pedagogical approaches, at the same time, others do not. In this sense students do not embrace CP and this is experienced as pedagogical disappointment on my part - an undermining or thwarting of my emancipatory ambitions and intentions. I had thought Access students (the very benefactors of the FE to HE experience) would be supportive of critical modes of address, but have discovered this cannot be taken for granted. As a critical educator, I find resistance towards CP both frustrating and problematic. In this thesis I want to discover more about the discursive positions students might adopt in relation to CP - why some wholeheartedly embrace whilst others resist.

A distinctive set of themes emerged from my Institution Focused Study (IFS) concerning student perceptions of, and rhetorical and discursive positions to, CP, and I wanted to take them further in this thesis. Following on from this I developed three key questions that have been central to the research process:

1. How do Access to HE students engage with CP and why do some resist?
2. What are the underlying motivations behind students' rhetorical and discursive positions towards CP?
3. How might critical practitioners support Access to HE students with fragile learner identities through the programme?

At the end of my IFS, I concluded that an increased awareness of the very conditions that truly sustain critical practice is necessary as a way of supporting students through the Access programme. Even though this may represent an essential first step, this is not an easy task and a number of research problems emerged in relation to how I could practicably approach and design an appropriate research framework throughout the Doctoral (EdD) programme. I have often felt constrained during my research journey - a kind of holding back on the pedagogical concerns I wanted to pursue.

As a way of thinking more deeply, concerning how identity is articulated and the discursive fields from which they emerge, I drew on the work of psychoanalytic and interpretive strategies during my IFS and whilst insightful, ultimately they were problematic. Undoubtedly, each student is a unique combination of experiences and identities, most of which may be invisible to me.

I might see some students for three hours a week, others for more, and my classes invariably take place in the wider context of their lives. Indeed, anything I bring into the classroom has the potential to connect to their lives, often having a social and emotional impact that can affect their learning. I will not always know when, how, or why these connections occur, although through experience, I understand that they will. For example, what Frosh and Young (2008: 110) refer to as possibly underlying (both conscious and unconscious) motivations behind students' 'rhetorical and discursive positions', was helpful in problematising the discursive fields from which students sometimes speak and helped frame question two. However, the impossibility of identity raised in psychoanalytic and interpretive literature was complex and limited in terms of its application.

In describing the role of the unconscious as furtive, disruptive and at all times interfering, Frosh (2002) draws on the work of Ernst Gellner (2003:72) who argues that:

...“The Unconscious’ is a kind of systematic interference, which hampers full and proper contact between the mind and its object, and thereby prevents effective knowledge’.

In short, the unconscious inhibits the likelihood of any tangible knowledge being attained because everything can be called into question. Actively dynamic, it is often hidden and resists any attempt to know it directly. Whilst psychoanalytical and interpretive literature has been helpful for exploring student identity and possible resistance to CP, and was a recurring theme throughout my IFS, it still left me in something of an intellectual cul-de-sac. Whilst at a conscious level, anxiety producing behaviours in relation to CP might be named and explored, at the level of unconsciousness, they may never be truly known.

Moreover, both extremely powerful and dynamic, the unconscious renders any straightforward understanding of identity improbable. It could be argued that as a way of revealing unconscious notions of resistance towards CP and making these known, like the analyst, critical practitioners might even have to undertake therapeutic work within the classroom. Given that practitioners may be neither qualified or have the time to undertake it seemed untenable (Jay, 1987).

This posed a fundamental difficulty because if students are unknowable, then attempting to understand them may be unproductive. When I refer to the positions students might adopt, I am referring to the ways in which they might construct, interpret and rationalise perceptions of CP. Given that the world of education is regulated through a multitude of often competing and contradictory discourses, individuals are invariably positioned in complex and multiple ways. I asked myself how I could ever know my students and how I could formulate a methodological framework for exploring their experiences of CP. The first challenge was getting at and selecting learners who would be typical of Access students and was largely a methodological struggle.

The second challenge was asking students how pedagogy was for them because the discourses through which CP is articulated are sometimes rather impenetrable, concept-laden and not necessarily student-friendly. Notwithstanding these difficulties, critical, feminist and post-structuralist feminist literature has been helpful in deconstructing and acknowledging issues concerning power, identity and how policy shifts in education might re-position students. Indeed, it provided a theoretical framework for my research work and I discuss this in some depth in Chapters Five and Six.

However, before discussing the relevance of CP in relation to my research question and professional concerns, I will give a brief working definition of how I conceive pedagogy and CP as used in this thesis. There are no catch-all or universal definitions of pedagogy, but it is often referred to as the art, science, or the profession of teaching: in essence, it is the practice of or science of teaching. In his seminal work *'Why no Pedagogy?'* Brian Simon (1981) suggests that in England at least, pedagogy was neither coherent nor systematic. To my surprise, in comparison with other countries, there is nothing comparable to the continental European science of teaching (Alexander, 2004). Further, there seems to be no universally agreed or acceptable definition and/or approach either to pedagogy or critical pedagogy (Keesing-Styles, 2003).

Although fundamental to teaching, learning and knowledge production, nevertheless, numerous approaches and practices might be placed under the 'pedagogy umbrella' (Gore, 1993: xi). To assume any singular version exists would suggest there is unanimity concerning its purpose and intentions and this is not the case. Like all educational discourses, pedagogy has been re-defined and articulated over time and the same can be said of CP (Keesing-Styles, 2003).

When I use the term I am referring to a plurality of approaches that are made up of, and informed by, various different theoretical strands each with their own particular struggles and concerns. In terms of emphasis, pedagogical approaches are nuanced, sometimes similar and frequently critical of the other. Nevertheless, critical discourses have provided me with a language through which I could articulate my dissatisfaction with traditional pedagogical approaches.

Yet because it has undergone many transformations in relation to social and historical contexts, there is no definitive definition of CP, although I will address this issue in more detail in Chapter Two.

In the context of this thesis however, it is about teaching and learning approaches seeking to raise students' critical consciousness. It differs from the traditional student/teacher pedagogical relationship, one in which the teacher is all knowing and students passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge – the banking concept of education. In contrast, by drawing on students' lived experiences, the classroom becomes a site where knowledge is produced through meaningful dialogue. Fundamental to questioning in whose interests knowledge is produced and transmitted, they offer the possibility of personal and social transformation and it is in this spirit in which it is used in this thesis.

As a critical practitioner I am seeking to redress educational exclusion amongst low participating groups. Yet on some occasions, my emancipatory intentions and supporting pedagogical modes of address fail to connect with my Access students. My experience in the classroom tells me that there are neither pedagogical panaceas nor neat solutions to the conundrums in which students are either ambivalent or resist CP. Nonetheless, failure in modes of address and pedagogical disappointment is something I increasingly experience and is of real professional concern (Ellsworth, 1989, 1997).

MY PASSION FOR CP - LOCATING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS

I believe being a former Access student makes me ideally placed to write this thesis. I want to say more about this because it has framed the professional and ontological nature of the research problem I wish to explore. It was as a mature Access student that I re-entered the world of formal education. This resulted in something of a positive 'epiphany' for me - a transformatory experience - a feeling of understanding my place in the world. Although my experience is a personalised one, it has been a decisive factor in my entering the world of teaching and learning. My professional concerns therefore resonate with notions of social justice, and empowerment for learners often marginalised, silenced and/or distorted by the educational process.

Given my background, as a white heterosexual male of a certain class, I have to acknowledge that my experience as a student concerning lack of voice and oppression may well be situated and partial. Practitioners are 'always implicated in the very structures they are trying to change' (Ellsworth, 1989:310). Whilst my personal narrative as a non-traditional student may allow me to understand something of oppressive behaviours that silence student voices, I at least try to reflect on my role as a practitioner-researcher and the impact of my own agency in the classroom and beyond.

As I embarked on the EdD programme it was an emerging sense of self-doubt concerning CP and its productive possibilities that framed my research and provided the motivation for this thesis. I intend to look at the perceptual interface between my own understandings of CP and that of my students.

Developing my pedagogical practice is important in helping Access students develop critical skills as they undertake their journey towards university and beyond. Yet these students often experience something of a culture shock as they embark on their HE degree programmes because of a lack of prior experience and variable expectations (Betts, 1999; Reay, *et al.* 2001, Reay, Ball & David 2002; Reay, 2003; Reay, David & Ball,2005; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010). Pedagogically speaking, it may be difficult to engage with some students, unless resistances to teaching can be overcome.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF ACCESS TO HE - STUDENTS OR CONSUMERS?

Before further discussing the rationale and professional concerns underpinning my research problem, it is necessary to briefly say something concerning the changing nature of Access programmes in relation to my research question, although I address this in more detail in Chapter Two.

Many of my students have never set foot in a university and I do my very best to support them through what is often a very challenging transition. In this respect my relationship with local HE providers and Open College Network South East Region (OCNSER) practitioner group is important. I am committed to assisting them on their journey into HE and developing teaching practices that help Access students develop the requisite skills for studying at a higher level. What emerged from my IFS however, suggests that in policy terms, neo-liberal discourses may increasingly render CP as anachronistic and research undertaken often supported this view.

Perhaps this is no surprise given the commodified landscape where students are often desperate for an education that will produce the required results. The work of Letherby and Marchbank highlights the paradox between pursuing critical knowledge and giving students what they seem to want. Put simply, the provision of sample answers often provides students with the immediate easy knowledge they require rather than what might be viewed as unnecessary and more challenging critical materials (Letherby & Marchbank, 1999a, 1999b; Marchbank & Letherby, 2000; Marchbank & Letherby *et al.* 2003). Given students' social positioning in relation to wider inequalities, this may be understandable, but it poses an enormous challenge for critical pedagogues.

However, ironically, although neo-liberal discourses may be viewed as re-configuring student identities to that of consumers (Troyna, 1994; Apple, 1996; McWilliams, Hatcher & Meadmore, 1999), in my own institution, outside of the quality-assurance process, students are not always asked about how teaching is for them. My concern is that, at least in my own institution, meeting students in mutual dialogical encounters is uncommon. Indeed, I would argue that authentic student voices are rarely heard in relation to pedagogy at all.

When they are heard it is often at given points - as part of the quality cycle process and in a rather generalised way. Invariably it serves as an indicator of 'performance' providing a generalist barometer of student pedagogical experience. Rather than being examined in any deep and meaningful sense, pedagogy is rendered a performative ancillary within the quality process.

Adopting a collaborative research approach and through dialogical encounters with students, I believe listening to and learning from them can open a window on their perspectives making CP more accessible (Davies, 1982; Clark, 1995; Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Oldfather & Thomas, 1998; Cook-Sather, 2002). I am trying very hard to equip students with the requisite skills and qualities necessary for studying at a higher level. However, at the same time, I am also trying to help them view their personal narratives in relation to the injustice and inequities that critical teaching practices seek to ameliorate. I believe that excluding student perspectives from dialogical encounters concerning CP impoverishes my efforts, portraying an incomplete picture of classroom life.

In this thesis I want to consider more deeply, and problematise, student pedagogical experience in a more nuanced way, making their journeys from FE to HE, pedagogically speaking, more relevant. However, I feel that students often view critical teaching practices in a decontextualised way, not always understanding their transformatory nature.

In terms of my professional autobiography, I need to be candid and state in no uncertain terms that CP is important to me. My belief is that at an individual level, students' lives can be transformed through the Access to HE experience. In giving students a voice, I try to encourage critical thinking and dialogue, letting them articulate their understanding of the world and valuing their knowledge as part of what I see as an empowering and emancipatory pedagogy (Shrewsbury, 1987; Robinson, 1994; Letherby & Marchbank, 1999a, 1999b; Letherby, 2003).

I realise there is a huge volume of literature concerning CP, its underpinning philosophies and discursive strands and this has informed my understanding, epistemological position and the questions I want to investigate. Throughout the EdD programme, academic work I have undertaken has involved actively integrating, re-visiting and undertaking additional literature work concerning my research problem and professional concerns. I wanted to refine and identify issues previously not considered in my IFS, other supporting work undertaken (Methods of Enquiry 1/2) and formulate new questions that might inform the research process.

However, at this point, I want to be explicit in stating that literature work undertaken is embedded throughout the thesis. Embedding literature throughout the text, (rather than compiling a discrete literature review) is important because, when I analyse and discuss my research findings, it is helpful to re-visit and utilise theoretical points made earlier in the study. Without doubt, it provides an overview of my understanding and conceptualisation of critical pedagogy, its founding principles and philosophy, and a compass for my professional and intellectual enquiry.

Writing in a modernist tradition Paulo Freire, possibly the most renowned critical educator, believed in students' ability to think critically about their educational situation and make connections between their lived realities and the often deep-seated social contexts in which they are located. According to Freire (1996: 53):

...‘Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other’.

Contemporary critical pedagogues such as Giroux, McLaren and Apple, bell hooks, Shor and others take up postmodern, anti-essentialist perspectives, whilst retaining the Freirian emphasis on critique, disrupting oppressive regimes of power/knowledge, and social transformation. In any critical sense CP makes known the relationship between knowledge, authority and power (Giroux, 1983). These concerns are at the heart of my professional identity and underpin the epistemological and pedagogical positions I intend to pursue. However, whilst accepting that collectively empowering students can lead to social change, unlike the main celebrated proponents of CP, who pursue productive possibilities of practice such as raising consciousness and social transformation, I am not wholly convinced about the wider social claims it makes on its own behalf.

I am not claiming that my pedagogical approach can lead to the social transformation envisaged by celebrated pedagogues in which societal changes can be achieved. I am in no way intending to politically radicalise students, although as Freire said, educational is always a political act. This is too wide a claim and I find a number of the rhetorical claims made for CP overly ambitious, a little under-theorised and often decontextualised from the daily realities of classroom life.

The emergence of increased grading and credentialism within Access programmes has also narrowed the space for pursuing critical practice and are fundamental to students' orientation and dispositions towards teaching and learning. Intrinsic to professional concerns explored in this thesis, they are considered in more detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2 - RATIONALE AND PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS UNDERPINNING MY RESEARCH PROBLEM - CONTEXTUALISING THE FIELD

I say more about the rationale and professional concerns underpinning my research problem in this chapter and give an overview of the Access movement, its purpose and emancipatory vision. I also outline what a critical classroom might look like and some of the pedagogical approaches I use. Finally, I problematise the growth of grading and credentialism and consider its impact on student identities and dispositions towards learning.

The aim of Access to HE programmes is very much concerned with social justice and widening participation. In this respect, I feel it is necessary to say something concerning its biography, how CP is related to its central philosophy and my pedagogical intentions. Access to HE programmes developed in the late 1970s as an alternative route to university level study for mature (predominantly over 21 years of age) students.

The courses are designed for students who have historically been under-represented in HE; often coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, subordinated by virtue of social class, racial, ethnic, or gender group, redressing educational exclusion amongst low participating groups (Parry, 1996; Betts, 1999; Burke, 2002a, 2004). Indeed, they often provide a 'second chance' for mature learners who, for various reasons, had not experienced a great deal of, or not succeeded in, formal education the first time round. The *raison d'être* behind the Access movement is concerned (through closer liaison with FE/HE providers) with focusing on under-represented groups and providing progression to HE.

Even though there is now increased diversity amongst Access courses in terms of students served, qualification pathways and models of teaching and learning, from the beginning they provided an opportunity for mature learners to progress to HE by less traditional routes (Hayes, King & Richardson, 1997 for additional details). Our own Access programme is licensed by the Authorised Validating Agency (AVA) in the name of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). At the time of writing OCNSER (Open College Network South East Region) validates our programmes and these are delivered across a number of qualification pathways including: Business and Law, Nursing Professions, Humanities, Social Work and Teaching. Rather than the more typical routes taken into HE by A-level students, Access students frequently come via more non-traditional routes (Williams, 1997; Thomas, 2001). Traditionally, these are students whose:

...‘voices have been silenced or distorted by oppressive cultural and educational formations’ (Ellsworth, 1989: 309).

Although more recently the age range of Access cohorts is getting younger, typically they are mature students and often (but not exclusively) from non-traditional backgrounds. In this way Access programmes have been deemed more appropriate for these learners (Parry, 1996; Nieto, Dimitriadou & Davy 2008). At the heart of the Access movement there is a concern with student-centred pedagogical approaches as a way of supporting learners in gaining the requisite skills to move forward with their studies.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY - LIBERATORY AND EMANCIPATORY APPROACHES

Having already outlined a brief working definition of CP in Chapter One, it must be said the term is rather broad in its scope and requires developing in relation to my pedagogical approaches. As already mentioned in Chapter One, it is concerned with reconfiguring the traditional student/practitioner relationship, in which new knowledge is generated through meaningful dialogue. As Parry (1986: 46) suggests:

...‘Unlike the banking of knowledge under an A level regime the Access intention is to develop content both as a vehicle for improving study and as necessary foundation for further study’.

It shares some considerable historical and contextual territory with critical theory. The work of the Frankfurt School is central to its founding principles and is also the starting point for thinking about its productive possibilities. However, as I have stated, arriving at a precise definition can be difficult, because the term is informed by the contributions of numerous critical educators and theoretical perspectives. For Collins (1998: 63) getting actively concerned with CP is to be:

...‘realistically involved in enlarging the sites within our institutions where genuine, non-coercive dialogue and reasonable opposition to oppressive bureaucratic controls can emerge’.

I think of it as a pedagogical approach that attempts to help students question and challenge dominant societal beliefs and practices. The narrative of CP situates the critical practitioner as one who seeks to empower, bringing justice and emancipation. In this way the critical pedagogue has a feeling of empathy for injustice and is moved to change it. In any critical context it is about thinking analytically and attempting to do so without bias (Keesing-Styles, 2003). Undoubtedly, there is a close relationship between critical theory, CP and the tradition of critical thinking.

However, whilst the last two each share some common ground, criticality is not conceptualised in the same way (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Critical thinking, although briefly referred to, does nevertheless have a relationship with CP, and although it encourages analysis of various situations and arguments to identify faulty or unreliable assertions or meanings, it does not specifically demand social action (ibid). It also has its own very comprehensive literature and associated discourses, but these are not examined in this thesis.

Although I will discuss it in more detail in Chapter Three, the authors most strongly associated (although not exclusively) with the critical tradition include Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Ira Shor. The critical movement calls into question the issue of power in the teaching and learning context, concerning itself with social and cultural formations serving to perpetuate or legitimate the status quo, and how and in whose interests knowledge is produced and transmitted. In turn, it can be thought of as emancipator and has a great deal of resonance for practitioners committed to empowering students. In the field of education it is often perceived as possessing almost evangelical qualities. Robinson's (1994:7) definition sums up the spirit of empowerment discourses quite well:

... 'Empowerment is a personal and social process, a liberatory sense of one's own strengths, competence, creativity and freedom of action; to be empowered is to feel power surging into one from other people and from inside, specifically the power to act and grow'.

McLaren, (1989:182) sums up the relational link between the two terms suggesting that:

... 'empowerment means not only helping the students to understand and engage the world around them, but also enabling them to exercise the kind of courage necessary to change the social order where necessary'.

At classroom level critical approaches involve moving away from reductive transmission models of teaching and learning towards designing and offering more challenging learning experiences. As such, critical educators attempt to disrupt the effects of oppressive regimes of power and hierarchies located within the classroom and pedagogical approaches such as mode of assessment and grading that serve to subdue or silence student agency (Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Schacht, 2000).

Elizabeth Ellsworth sums up what I hope to do in the classroom and beyond in pursuing emancipatory possibilities. For Ellsworth (1997:6):

... 'Pedagogy as a social relationship is very close in. It gets right in there - in your brain, your body, your heart, in your sense of self, of the world, of others, and of possibilities and impossibilities in all those realms. A pedagogical mode of address is where the social construction of knowledge and learning gets deeply personal'.

I cannot deny that my commitment to CP is a personal thing and its emancipatory visions and possibilities a guiding light for my classroom practice. I am not, however, suggesting that my own agency or institution should be a site for social transformation: this may be overly-ambitious. Moreover, I do not see myself engaged in a political project in which students are necessarily agents of social change. As a practitioner I do not consider this necessarily to be part of my remit and I shall expand on this when I discuss literature that informs the discursive field. Nevertheless, pedagogically speaking, I feel there is something going on in my classrooms - something's getting lost in translation and I want to know what it is. In this respect I feel it is at least necessary to give a flavour of what CP might look like in a typical classroom of mine.

WHAT DOES A CRITICAL CLASSROOM LOOK LIKE?

Individual classes would vary according to timetabling, sequencing of sessions, topics themselves and so on and following conventional pedagogical approaches, a typical lesson would begin with and be guided by learning aims and outcomes. However, by their very nature my classrooms are more participatory and democratic, reflecting a more constructivist approach to curricula, knowledge and some aspects of assessment, rather than top-down approaches.

Many of my students wish to pursue careers in the public sector and private sectors. I want them to look more closely at how knowledge is constructed, by whom and for what purposes. Rather than presenting my material simply through exposition, I try to engage students in open dialogue, creating opportunities to share personal stories and develop knowledge grounded in their own experiences. At classroom level this typically involves pedagogical approaches that promote student voice and allows them the opportunity to think critically about their own lives and circumstances.

Moreover, I do try and encourage students to solve their own problems and this frequently requires some restraint on my part. It presents quite a challenge and on occasions I have had to play a more active role in discussions and sometimes return to more traditional approaches. This can happen if students are going down the wrong path, need additional support, or discussions go awry or get heated. As with conventional pedagogy, student misunderstandings and misinterpretations provide a signal that requires a response. In any Freireian sense, unlike traditional approaches, where students receive official knowledge through exposition, there is more space for open and democratic practice.

I try to facilitate this process by helping them find the language to conceptualise and articulate their thoughts. However, I need to be clear, this is not always easy and attempting to teach every class within a critical structure can feel like teaching the curriculum twice over. In this sense I am trying to reveal connections between societal, educational and students' home and personal experiences and at the same time, meet the expectations and requirements of my own organisation and that of OCN SER. Nevertheless, by connecting with students' experiences and concerns I encourage them to examine and better understand the forces that shape their world. At the same time, I try to ensure they have access to knowledge (both functional and cultural) and the critical knowledge to engage with HE and pursue their career aspirations.

Problem-posing is central within critical practice and for example, exploration of a given topic would usually start with the students' own understanding of social phenomena/problems – their views and experiences. As a critical practitioner, this is about being prepared to let go, loosen pedagogical strings, and move in a more student-centred direction. The contrast between the previously mentioned 'banking' model of education and problem-posing or dialogic approaches can be conceptualised in the following way:

... 'A Freirean critical teacher is a problem-poser who asks thought-provoking questions and who encourages students to ask their own questions. Through problem-posing, students learn to question answers rather than merely to answer questions. In this pedagogy, students experience education as something they do, not as something done to them' (Shor, 1993: 26).

Typical activities might include brainstorming, role playing, peer review or experiential learning.

However, this does not mean learning outcomes and grading criteria are abandoned, it is just that learning activities are developed from direct experience (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007). I encourage students to look critically at societal messages and other sources of cultural phenomena and involve themselves directly in the experience. In short, it involves a direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the experience and considering the possibilities of doing something about it. Sociology for example, can help students understand the workings of human agency. Furthermore, it can be beneficial in unravelling past histories or narratives, revealing the lived experience of social actors concerned.

In terms of the physical environment, rather than a panoptic arrangement implying the need for surveillance, the classroom is organised in a more democratic way. Chairs are quite often arranged in circles rather than in rows facing a teacher's desk, re-configuring students to that of co-learners and co-facilitators. I frequently use what can best be described as learning circles, sometimes for example, sitting among students. Small groups provide spaces for listening, reflection and or action and in effect, the classroom becomes a safe space in which risks can be taken. I might use peer review based on experiential learning or stand-alone pair/small group work. Small-group discussion may well be based around case studies (often constructed by students themselves) with supporting questions; an aide memoire for directing discussion and debate.

I try to act as a facilitator and supporter of learning. Case studies, focus groups, peer review, mini-research projects and supporting questions presented to the students in small-group discussions often elicit valuable responses. In turn, these can generate more questions, stimulating deeper discussion and analysis. Students are encouraged to reflect on their learning using various learning cycle models as a way of thinking about and discussing skills and personal development moments. These are used in conjunction with Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) emphasising the importance of reflecting on the learning process. As the year progresses, I use the various activities that create scenarios, highlighting and seeking to uncover competing societal truths. As student confidence grows I also use actor-audience dialogue to dramatise social events and activities such as letter writing and preparing fictitious press releases.

I always introduce these processes incrementally and from the beginning of their studies, encourage students to engage in self-reflection and then build it in as an expectation and part of the assessment environment. As the programme develops and students' confidence and competence progress, so the expectations increase to the point where they contribute to the assessment of their own and others' work. I actively encourage them to reflect on the privileged voice (often the practitioner or significant others) and participate in the process of 'knowledge construction', mindful of the boundaries concerning:

... 'their own experience and perspectives and therefore value the perspectives of others' (Robinson and Schaible, 1993: 363 & 369).

PROBLEMATISING RESISTANCE TO CP- WHAT IS GOING ON?

Having taught Access students for over ten years the feeling that there is something going on – something that is getting lost in translation has grown stronger; in summation, the nature of Access is changing. There are a number of possible reasons for this and they need considerable thought. What I mean is that the profile of students is changing and demands upon the Access programme are changing too. Thinking about students' resistance to my critical intentions, I believe there is a link between the changing educational policy terrain in which pedagogues practice, the nature of students (typologies) themselves and more outcome-driven modes of assessment and grading. Although there are no universal pedagogical solutions in meeting students' needs (different learners learn at different stages, requiring different methods of teaching), I use a repertoire of strategies and skills in meeting their needs. However, I am finding that students are increasingly resisting the various pedagogical approaches I have always used and I want to know why this is.

There are tensions between my perception and that of the students concerning CP, which could have a number of possible explanations. These include spoon feeding on previous courses, the personalised learning agenda (especially when linked to criteria competency), an increase in policy-driven instrumentalism or even resistance to me personally. How my students think and feel about the pedagogical practices I employ is of crucial importance and I wanted to take a closer look at their lived experiences as they progress from FE to HE.

Increasingly I find students do not always share a preference for the emancipatory teaching practices I employ. Moreover, teaching activities such as group work and experiential learning, which are sometimes viewed as ineffective, are rejected. These concerns are well documented (Letherby & Marchbank, 1999a, 1999b) by those who view students as increasingly resisting critical and empowering teaching strategies and who highlight emerging tensions developing knowledge and giving students what they ask for. That is, the knowledge necessary to pass assignments and examinations rather than the pursuit of education for emancipatory reasons.

GRADING, CREDENTIALISM AND CREEPING INSTRUMENTALISM

There may be several things going on here. Firstly, in terms of students' profile and typology and secondly, the introduction of grading of students' work and individual modules (although there is no overall grade for portfolios submitted). Since the mid-1990s Access programmes have become increasingly incorporated within mainstream UK post-compulsory education. To some extent former community-based provision has been absorbed into the Open College Network's provision (Warmington, 2002). Throughout the 1990s, policy initiatives such as widening participation and lifelong learning increased participation of mature learners in formal education (the Fryer, 1997 and Kennedy, 1997 Reports are good examples). However, in a policy terrain where lifelong learning and widening participation have become increasingly normalised, the risks attached to non-participation have become greater.

Closely associated with the writing of Ulrich Beck (1992) and framed within neo-liberal economic debates concerning the provision of education (and other public services) and personal liability. It has resulted in the individualisation of both social problems and possible solutions. In the *Risk Society* Beck argued that the:

... 'Intensification and individualisation of social inequalities interlock. As a consequence, problems of the system are lessened politically and transformed into personal failure...social crisis appear to be of individual origin, and are perceived as social only indirectly and to a very limited extent' (Beck, 1992:89).

The process of individualisation is useful for understanding the risks attached in both returning to, and moving on, to higher education. Describing the way in which modern society both organises and responds to risk, societal problems have become a personal liability. In effect, it becomes the responsibility of the individual, rather than the state. Drawing on the work of Beck, Katherine Ecclestone (2002a, 2002b) suggests contemporary definitions of risk depict present education as a way of safeguarding against certain risks and those who refuse to participate are increasingly viewed in a negative way. Arguably, the neo-liberalist policy contexts might be thought of as framing educational policy approaches in such a way that they have changed the nature of Access and other progressive educational programmes. This may alter the way in which students position themselves in relation to teaching and learning.

For that reason, education may have become more of a political act - one that is fraught with fragility and risk. There is a body of literature that draws on student experiences undertaking Access programmes and although not all practitioners would share the view, that students have fragile learner identities, in what has become a highly competitive education system, it is worthy of discussion (Brine & Waller, 2004).

To some extent students have always been labelled within education, whether as being academically more able or in some way needing additional support. Fragile or vulnerable learning identities are both complicated and subtle. Moreover, because subjectivity is both created and reproduced within the classroom environment and beyond, arriving at any straightforward understanding of learner fragility is problematic (Ecclestone, 2002a, 2002b, 2007, 2010).

Having had negative memories of experiences at school or other educational institutions, mature learners sometimes construct themselves as not particularly academically able or as having under-achieved. Consequently, they may experience low self-esteem and feelings of vulnerability (Maclachlan, Hall, Tett, Crowther & Edwards, 2008). At the same time, they invariably want to be successful and through re-engagement with formal education, are often determined to repair perceived deficits and re-construct their learner identities (Brine & Waller, 2004). However, perceiving mature learners as a relatively homogenous group in terms of previous educational experiences and learning identity is problematic. Whilst some may view Access programmes as a way of rectifying previous educational failings, this may be overly deterministic. Some may have stronger learner identities than others and age, class, ethnicity or gender, renders any clear-cut categorisation impossible (Warmington, 2002).

Mature learning identity profiles are often fragmented and they may orientate towards a range of possibilities and change over time (Shah, 1994; Elliott, 1999). Nevertheless, many Access students are seeking new learning identities, distancing themselves from previous failure and aspiring to become successful learners (Ecclestone, 2010).

Developed by Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000: 593), the concept of a 'learning career' provides a way of understanding how students might construct their identities and why they might change over time. Non-linear and unpredictable, students might develop a succession of dispositions (often unspoken) and may orientate themselves towards a range of experiences and possibilities. Both enduring and subject to change, they may be framed by expectations and beliefs about teaching, learning and previous experiences of assessment (2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2007, 2010). In effect, learner identities and dispositions towards pedagogical approaches are constantly re-constructed and multiply positioned and cannot be assumed (Burke, 2002a, 2004). This does not mean that broader characteristics concerning mature learner identity cannot be established, but an appreciation that like careers, they have their own trajectories, is an important consideration.

Returning to the classroom may undoubtedly necessitate students changing their learner identity/ies and in this sense they can be thought of as undertaking learning careers (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Brine and Waller, 2004). There is undoubtedly some commonality of experience among mature learners.

As an experienced Access practitioner I am familiar with some of the anxieties and difficulties students encounter on returning to the classroom. Particularly at the start of the programme there are fears concerning students' perceived lack of knowledge being exposed to public scrutiny (Baxter & Britain, 2001; Reay, 2003; Shah, 1994). Indeed, for some, older students embarking on the programme can be about re-visiting and exorcising ghosts from the past concerning personal failure.

Previously, Access programmes were viewed as an alternative way back into formal education for this type of student (aged twenty six years and above). More recently however, they increasingly provide younger learners with an opportunity to re-enter education, having either left school with poor CGSE grades, or prior to or during their A-levels (Parry, 1996). Yet these students often have quite well developed learner identities. Because of this, I increasingly find a divergence between older students with a more holistic disposition towards learning, and younger ones, who are increasingly more instrumental in their approach. Although they might both be thought of as second chance learners who are motivated and want to be successful, some have stronger more embedded identities and dispositions towards learning.

A typical practitioner quote from the Access to HE Data Trends Survey (Final Report March 2009) states that:

....'the overall proportion of applicants from the 19-21 age range is increasing (this is the cohort that has the highest attrition rate too); We are finding [also] that the age of students wishing to join Access is on average lower as perhaps they have not succeeded at A levels and are looking for a fast track into HE. They find the intensity of the course sometimes daunting and this can lead to poor retention; nearly all our applicants are young (19-21) and on benefits - we are losing the traditional mature applicant who is either returning to study or looking for a career change'.

Although Access programmes were originally intended to attract students predominantly from working class backgrounds, because the age of entry has been lowered, the students are getting younger and increasingly, more are coming from middle-class backgrounds (Ball, Maguire & Macrae, 2000; Ecclestone, 2002a, 2002b, 2010). Younger middle class students are often the type of learner, who may wish to circumvent the traditional A Level route or, having already attained poor grades, want to improve upon these.

I believe that previously mature students were more receptive to CP. Of course older students may have more vague memories of the types of teaching they experienced at school, whereas younger students might possibly be more familiar with behaviourist and instrumental approaches to teaching and assessment and have experienced more spoon feeding. Torrance and Pryor (1998) suggest learning identities may emerge as a result of increasingly explicit and fixed modes of assessment. Indeed, the move over the last 20 years towards criterion referenced assessment and competence-based assessment in education has exacerbated this situation.

Greater transparency of intended learning outcomes and the criteria by which they are judged may encourage instrumentalism and these are well documented (Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Ecclestone, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003; Torrance & Coultas, 2004; Torrance *et al.* 2005). Indeed, student concerns with issues such as the pressure to get better grades and credits, a better job, or places at a particular university on a specific course are examples of this phenomenon, possibly interrupting my pedagogical intentions. In this way, greater transparency of criteria and learning objectives may lead to students wanting additional support and personalised coaching. Further, there is a real danger of eradicating the challenge of learning and the critical approaches that might support it.

The situation is not helped because, in turn, universities are now requesting specific numbers of credits at a particular grade (for example, a merit or distinction) in order for a student to secure a place on a particular programme¹.

In reality this is played out when students sometimes place more value on securing evidence to complete a portfolio and/or gain the necessary or expected grades to accomplish an award. This may lend itself to the pursuit of de-constructed and atomised outcome-based teaching and learning, undermining critical approaches. It may also shape or influence student perception of their position in relation to practitioners. Thus *good* teachers are those who give substantial formative feedback and lots of guidance, whereas those perceived as *bad* teachers may have high expectations of students, adopting more challenging but critical teaching approaches.

In this way, some practitioners are preferred, and this could have an effect on student perception of teaching ability and pedagogical approaches adopted. Undoubtedly there is something new going on in addition to the anxieties students with fragile learner identities traditionally experience. They have always cited fears and concerns such as ‘what if I cannot do it’... ‘who will help me’... ‘I cannot stand up in front of people’ and so on. In this respect, whilst the use of grading descriptors may be desirable in providing a more systematic approach to assessment, it does however place students under additional pressure.

¹ The introduction of grading of modules within Access programmes (during 2008/9) was intended to create parity of esteem with traditional A Levels and other entrance to HE qualifications. Individual modules are given an overall grade and students are expected to gain a certain number of credits at a particular grade. However, universities have different *expectations* in terms of the number and combinations of credits and grades students should achieve.

I may also be experiencing barriers to experiential learning, group-work/projects and peer review for example, because students have come through traditional classroom settings and have little experience of working collaboratively. Other students may not want their grades to be affected by the performance of their peers and alongside other micro-behaviours, such as established cliques within student groups, this may prove extremely problematic.

Undoubtedly, the transition from FE to HE can cause difficulty and be a fraught one, but as Jessen and Elander (2009:359) point out:

...‘To make a successful transition from (FE) to Higher Education (HE), students must adjust to different styles of teaching, develop deeper and more autonomous approaches to learning, and prepare in different ways for assessment’.

I believe that developing critical approaches will help them make a smoother transition and acquire the necessary critical skills for studying at a higher level. Moreover, these skills are increasingly valuable for the world of work and throughout life. Yet in spite of the difficulties I have outlined, I remain optimistic that educators committed to transformative pedagogy can play a significant role in the daily struggle of student lives.

Re-visiting and drawing on literature in the field has been helpful for recontextualising both research questions and my professional concerns. They have been crucial in helping me re-think and gain a greater understanding of the theoretical and practical limitations of my critical project and are examined in Chapter Three. Moreover, the literature provides a bridgehead for thinking about the methodology and research methods that helped in unlocking some of the pedagogical conundrums I have been experiencing and is an issue to which I shall now turn.

CHAPTER 3 - HOW LITERATURE INFORMS MY EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITION AND QUESTIONS I INTEND TO INVESTIGATE.

Whilst the two previous chapters were intended to outline and contextualise the rationale and professional concerns underpinning this thesis, in this chapter I consider literature that informed my epistemological position, my over-arching research question and methodological framework I would eventually use. In particular, I focus on the work of Paulo Freire because his work has been the inspiration for research work undertaken throughout the doctoral programme and pedagogical approaches I employ. Drawing on feminist and post-structuralist feminist discourses, I then go on to explore some of the limitations and practicability of CP, including individual subjectivity and the situated and contingent nature of identity.

There is an extensive body of literature and existing knowledge informing my epistemological and professional position and the research questions I intend to investigate. My existing research and thinking has drawn on literature from across a number of fields including, the critical movement and those of a feminist and post-structuralist feminist persuasion. Without a doubt, the discursive field informed the research methods I eventually adopted and I want to say something about these influences. In particular, CP has its roots in critical theory (I will acknowledge it but it will not be particularly prominent in this thesis) and the two share common philosophies and approaches in terms of application. Both are concerned with investigating institutional and societal practices with a view to resisting the imposition of dominant social norms and structures. As a philosophy it has its early beginnings in neo-Marxian literature and critical theorists, generally associated with the Frankfurt School.

I am sympathetic with its chief philosophical dignitaries including: Adorno, Fromm, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas and their concerns for social justice and action. Viewing educational institutions as sites of struggle towards a more just society, it provides an underpinning philosophy concerning my approach to teaching: a theory and practice of helping students achieve critical consciousness. Habermas in particular, sets out the theoretical grounds from which reasoned reflection on alternative ways of experiencing and shaping society become possible - those innate learning capacities which enable us to understand each other and the world.

In this way, pedagogy informed by Habermas's communicative rationality (Cooke, 1994) moves us away from a deterministic subject-object way of knowing, which characterises teaching and learning approaches geared to instrumental rationality. Drawing on his work, I believe in the need to develop communicative competence as an educative task. For that reason critical theory provides a way of thinking about, and is the genesis for, a pedagogy exploring and critiquing an education system that reinforces a dominant hegemony.

However, although helpful in thinking about classroom relationships (for example, whose truths are valid, wider societal relations and institutions in which knowledge production occurs) it is something of a Herculean task for those committed to the critical project, yet one to which many are still committed (McLaren, 1989,1995).

THE EMERGENCE OF THE CRITICAL MOVEMENT

Critical and liberatory pedagogy emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, providing the philosophical origins and assumptions of CP, re-emerging in the mid 1980s to dominate literature in the area. Authors most strongly associated with the critical tradition that informed my thinking and practice and include: Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and, Ira Shor. It would be impossible, however, to acknowledge all voices contributing to the critical pedagogical movement. Nevertheless, any discussion of CP must begin with a discussion with the work of Freire who is often viewed as the founding philosopher of CP (McLaren, 2000).

As already mentioned, I have focused predominantly on Freire because his work resonates most directly with my own liberatory intentions. When I first read his work, the idea that education could be the practice of freedom captivated me. It resonates strongly with what I hope to achieve in the classroom and has provided me with a philosophical foundation for pedagogical practice. Freire education as a practice of freedom and was informed by his experiences of working within adult educational projects in Brazil during the late 1950s and early 1960s. At the heart of Freirian pedagogy is an anti-authoritarian, dialogical and interactive approach focusing on the relational power for students and workers (ibid). In this way students are positioned as actively constructing their own knowledge and this foregrounds the political nature of education. Examining the social and political critiques of everyday life located at the heart of the curriculum, CP focuses on critiques of social injustices and inequities and empowering students:

...‘to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside of their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live’ (McLaren, 1989: 131).

The subject-object relationship is at the heart of a Freirian education and is one in which dialogue can arouse critical consciousness. For the critical practitioner:

...‘Education of a liberating character is a process by which the educator invites learners to recognise and unveil reality critically’ (Freire: 1985:102).

My own practice draws on critical approaches built around sociological and humanities topics engendering narratives relevant to students’ own lived experiences (Freire, 1973, 1996). Often highly thematic, they can be located in multicultural and anti-racist educational theories and practices developed as a way of opposing the discriminatory and sometimes exclusionary nature of education (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994). I try to deploy what Ladson-Billings (1994:18) describes as:

...‘a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes’.

As I have already suggested, Freire’s assertion (in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1996) that rather than simply being about politics, the idea that education is a political act, is a convincing one and something (sometimes reluctantly) I engage with on a daily basis. I do not necessarily think of my classroom as a site for political engagement, but as a practitioner, accept that in selecting certain course content, methods of assessment and delivery, this may well be a political act. To use his words:

...‘no educational practice takes place in a vacuum, only in a real context - historical, economic, political, and not necessarily identical to any other context’ (Freire, 1985: 12).

In this way the pedagogical practice and underpinning theories can never be neutral.

Indeed, the decision not to consider certain ideas in a given class is just as political as the so called objective facts that are covered (Gore 1992, 1993; Maher & Tetreault, 1994). Originally located in the context of promoting adult literacy, his work has been influential in establishing an epistemological and philosophical framework for thinking through the founding principles of the progressive agenda (Shor, 1980, Giroux, 1983; Freire, 1985; Freire & Shor, 1987; Giroux 1988a, 1988b; McLaren, 1989; McLaren & Leonard 1993; McLaren, 1995; Freire 1996).

Freire (1973, 1985, 1996) calls for critical engagement over regurgitation of received knowledge and the abandonment of banking practices that envisage students as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. Certainly his criticism of transmission models of teaching and learning has informed and invigorated how I work with students. It provides a starting point for moving away from instrumentalist tendencies and locating communication and dialogical relations at the heart of educational experiences grounded in the reality of students' lives (ibid). Its emphasis on dialogical relations and problem-posing/solving and developing critical consciousness is very appealing. As Freire (1996: 62) stated:

...‘whereas banking education anesthetises and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality’.

For Freire banking approaches foster and maintain false consciousness among learners whereas critical approaches help demystify taken for granted knowledge and bring the learner to consciousness. He argues that:

...‘Education is suffering from narration sickness. The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expands on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students’ (Freire, 1996: 52).

Avoiding transmission models of teaching in which my words and knowledge are all pervasive, I try to avoid treating students as passive objects to be worked on, inviting them to participate in the process of their own learning. Freire understood that studying is challenging, requiring ‘a systematic critical attitude’; one that is acquired by way of ‘intellectual discipline’ and practice (Freire, 1985:2). Although my students find critical practices challenging, I would agree with his assertion that banking practices undermine criticality. As his words suggest:

...‘its focus is fundamentally to kill our curiosity, our inquisitive spirit, and our creativity. A student’s discipline becomes a discipline for ingenuity in relation to text, rather than an essential critique of it’ (1985:2).

Freire’s work has been significant in situating the pedagogical questions I want to investigate concerning social agency and voice. Writing within modernist traditions, he offers an epistemological basis for CP - a language of critique and the possibility of a voice for students through which to question dominant discourses and taken-for-granted assumptions concerning the social world.

In this way, learning links the classroom to outside social problems, and students learn their capacity for social change - a positive language of human empowerment (Giroux, 1988a). A critical education then, becomes a radical one in which learners should take their new found analysis to transform the world (Giroux, 1988a, 1988b; Shor, 1992). In my role as practitioner I can offer students an increased awareness of their world through dialogue - what he calls the development of ‘conscientizacao’ or ‘conscientization’ (Freire, 1985, 1996). Usually translated as critical consciousness, it is a process by which coming to understand one’s place in the world and the historical and social forces that act upon them:

...‘One of the important things in conscientization is to provoke recognition of the world, not as “given” world, but as a world dynamically “in the making”’ (Freire, 1985: 106).

Such a process requires both reflection and action or what Freire refers to as praxis – a dialectical view of knowledge, in which all human activity can be understood as emerging from an ongoing interaction of reflection, dialogue and action (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009). As Freire (1996: 60) puts it:

...‘Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it. Those truly committed to the cause of liberation can accept neither the mechanistic concept of consciousness as an empty vessel to be filled, nor the use of the banking methods of domination (propaganda, slogans - deposits) in the name of liberation’.

Thus praxis is conceived as a defining feature of human life and a condition of freedom. Working within an emancipatory discourse, for both critical pedagogues’ and learners’, the classroom is a microcosm of wider societal power relations and inequalities where the emphasis is on power to rather than power over².

This represents a re-conceptualisation of power and is one in which my students would be constructed as participants rather than simply objects to be worked on. In this way, dialogical relations provide a site in which problem-posing/solving can offer the possibility of conscientization and for that reason, necessitates what Freire calls the ‘teacher-student contradiction’ be resolved. It is one in which:

...‘The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach’ (Freire, 1996: 60-61).

In this way students might become ‘critical co-investigators’ in dialogue with practitioners (ibid).

² Although both possibilities of are contested by Burbules, 1991 & Ellsworth, 1989.

Although I have problems with the critical movement's view of the role of education as a political force for both liberation and emancipation and reservations concerning its practical application, I persevere with its founding principles. At an institutional level, I would like to think that the use of student contracts, learner agreements, personalised learning and ongoing course evaluation and so on, are all evidence of this. However, whilst helpful in thinking about the productive possibilities of critical practice, it has a number of limitations in terms of its practicability and application in the classroom and informs my research methods and design. In the following section, I will draw on feminist (including those of a post-structuralist persuasion) perspectives as a way of revealing some of the weaknesses in critical discourses.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF CP?

Notwithstanding the contribution Freire and other critical theorists have made to my own pedagogical practice, there are a number of limitations with their work and these require attention. For example, in arguing for the liberation of the oppressed, one either shares solidarity with the oppressed or is against them and this is perhaps a little too deterministic. Moreover, the assumption that critical practitioners can be all-knowing and benign emancipators suggests a degree of naivety and to some extent this permeates critical discourses. Much of the feminist critique concerns itself with the division between enlightened and critically aware practitioners who magically bring students to a more enlightened state. Indeed, students are deemed to be in a state of false consciousness and are at the behest of the critical practitioner who is best placed to reveal truths concerning social justice and inequality.

Freire's belief that the practice of conscientization and praxis can lead to liberation is also possibly a little flawed because it is founded on the premise that a shared understanding of consciousness concerning what oppression actually is and may be unattainable. This becomes more problematic because critical discourses leave the power of would be critical practitioners largely unexamined. To presuppose that practitioners and students have a common understanding of what a humanising education might look like is rather problematic. As a practitioner, pursuing the Freirian struggle against oppression and moving the oppressed towards a more true humanity may be a central goal. However, as feminist pedagogues argue, it may offer a one-dimensional view in terms of its meaning and universal claims to truths that have historically ignored the voices of women.

Feminist writers (see Ellsworth, 1989, Weiler, 1991 and Gore, 1992, 1993) for example, are insightful in evaluating some of the claims critical pedagogy make and provide a theoretical framework for scrutinising some of its misleading and ambiguous properties. Feminists of a post structural persuasion, highlight the contradictions of assuming that critical practitioners are ever really in a position of being able to empower students. Gore (1993:120) for instance, proposes that empowerment is a contested and discursively produced concept. Drawing on Foucauldian perspectives she argues that:

...‘in this specific pedagogical technique, the circulation of power is, potentially, both repressive and emancipatory’.

As a ‘regime of truth’, in Foucauldian terms, it may not necessarily feel that way to those involved. Although benign in its aims, the idea of the practitioner as an empowerer and student as objects to be empowered is problematic (ibid).

Her line of argument is that any pre-given straightforward dualism concerning student-practitioner identity is problematic. What is really being said here is that there is an underlying tendency to assume that the critical practitioner is already empowered and she questions whether students can ever really be empowered to attain a desirable outcome (Gore, 1992, 1993).

There are a number of issues that might surface including who might speak for whom, for whose benefit and whether it is even safe to do so. Elizabeth Ellsworth, for example, argues that critical discourses are characterised by a number of theoretical contradictions. She argues that they fail to acknowledge the nature of power relations inherent within pedagogical relationships which may in fact be oppressive. Further, critical practitioners' presumed emancipatory authority and the idea that they alone can reveal to students their true position (that of being oppressed) is questionable.

In her article '*Why doesn't this feel empowering?*' (1989: 297-324) Ellsworth problematises the ways in which concepts such as empowerment, student voice, and dialogue, serve as 'repressive myths'. Moreover, progressive critical discourses may in fact marginalise those it professes to support and stand up for. Worse still, critical pedagogy:

...'*treats the symptoms but leaves the disease unnamed and untouched*' (1989: 306).

Rather than empowering students, pedagogical practices that claim to be progressive may in fact obscure their powerlessness. She stresses that at its deepest linguistic roots, they may be too abstract and overly optimistic for the realities of classroom life (ibid).

Simply believing that if students are oppressed, pedagogues can bring about personal and social transformation may be naïve. Ellsworth suggests Freire and other proponents of critical pedagogy fail to acknowledge power differentials that might exist between the teachers and students and these serve as:

...‘repressive myth[s] that perpetuate[s] relations of domination’ and obscure...‘the actual political agendas ... namely antiracism, antisexism, anti-elitism, anti-heterosexism, anti-ableism, anti-classism, and anti-neo-conservatism’ (1992: 93).

Ellsworth (1992: 98) goes on to claim that they:

...‘have failed to launch any meaningful analysis of or program for reformulating the institutionalized power imbalances between themselves and their students, or of the essentially paternalistic project of education itself’.

From my own experience I know only too well that attempting to put into practice critical approaches advocated by Freire, Giroux and McLaren, concerning student voice and dialogue, underplay the nature of student identity. Indeed, in my own classroom they sometimes exacerbated the very conditions I am struggling against: namely Eurocentricism, racism, sexism, classism. This resonates with Ellsworth’s study (1992) of her class on anti-racist practices, which revealed the extent to which classroom discussions concerning race and gender can actually exclude the very students it is intended to include and intensify racist, sexist and classist, behaviour and authoritarian conditions.

Feminist critics cite a number of problems concerning pedagogical approaches intended to help learners discover their voices. Firstly, one has to consider whether a core authentic self actually exists and secondly, to what extent could it ever be truly heard.

As Gore (1992:80) points out:

...‘Calls for student voice in education presume students, voices, and identities to be singular, unchanging and unaffected by the context in which the speaking occurs’.

One also has to consider whether when student voices are spoken and heard, the critical practitioner would hear or recognise them. This is problematic because the critical practitioner becomes the arbiter of what might or might not be considered true or authentic. As the above examples suggest, there are times when speaking one’s voice might either be possible or safe. This is a long standing concern of mine and whilst I try to ensure my classrooms are safe environments in which students can have a voice and be heard, I cannot assume I possess the power to ensure that prejudice and discrimination are absent. I can never really be certain that critical classroom activities might not be undermined or derailed by some students, or the extent to which some students may be silencing one another.

Furthermore, for some students there is a risk attached to speaking which could be located within the classroom itself. It may not necessarily feel secure to less confident students and be perceived as less than democratic (Burke, 2002a). Moreover, the classroom may not necessarily be a safe place in which to speak of past oppression through fear of misunderstanding or disclosing too much (Ellsworth, 1989; Orner, 1992). For others, it may simply be too painful to talk of past experiences that invoke negative memories. As bell hooks (1994: 179) suggests:

...‘Even though students enter the “democratic” classroom believing they have the right to “free speech,” most students are not comfortable exercising this right to “free speech”. Most students are not comfortable exercising this right--especially if it means they must give voice to thoughts, ideas, feelings that go against the grain, that are unpopular’.

I find there are a number of difficulties inherent with CP relating to practical implementation. They often neglect the contingent nature of classroom life and student identity. As I have already stated, the role and authority of practitioners may be under-theorised and epistemological questions concerning claims for knowledge, truth and personal experience can be ambiguous.

Feminist post-structuralist literature acknowledges the fragmented, fluid and multiple positioning of subjectivity (Maynard & Purvis, 1994). Appreciating the limitations of attempting empowerment through nuanced and discursively produced voices helps problematise notions of learner identity (Ellsworth, 1989; Weiler, 1991; Orner, 1992; Gore, 1993; Maher, 2001; Burke, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2006; Burke & Jackson, 2007).

In addition to highlighting how critical discourses under-theorise the dichotomy between oppressors and oppressed, feminist critiques suggest that as a political theory of education, the contingent and fluid nature of identity contributes to its complexity. Gore (1993) for example, differentiates two strands contained within CP in terms of its usefulness. Whilst Gore approves of Freire contributions which are useful and may assist other practitioners, she disapproves of it as a pedagogical political project, and in particular, those undertaken by Giroux and McLaren. At a theoretical level it stands accused of being de-contextualised in terms of its actual meaning and overly politicised. She also maintains that the absence of prescribing specific practices applicable to classrooms represents no more than an abstract political vision; not so much a 'critical pedagogy as a critical educational theory' (1993: 42).

The consequence of this is:

...‘their pedagogy might be seen to restrict its audience to those readers who have the time, energy, or inclination to struggle with it (namely, other academics and graduate students; not the avowedly targeted teachers or, in many cases, undergraduate students) and, in so limiting its audience, it subsequently limits its political potential’ (38).

I share Gore’s concern about decontextualised abstract theories that are impracticable in the classroom. I am not arguing for a catch all handbook of guidance for pedagogical practices and indeed, Freire was very much against this. However, more could be done to appreciate the daily lived realities of the classroom rather than the de-contextualised theoretical approaches. In her deconstruction and analysis of what empowerment might mean in terms of its application, Gore believes it has no particular meaning prior to its construction within specific discourses. Her argument is that empowerment is contested and discursively produced.

Following her line of argument, any pre-given straightforward dualism concerning student-practitioner identity is problematic. I accept that by the virtue of being a teacher - an authority figure - I cannot necessarily create an egalitarian classroom environment. Therefore, acknowledging critical practitioners themselves may be ideologically free from oppressive tendencies requires serious consideration (Orner, 1992). Reflecting on her own attempts at emancipatory pedagogy, Ellsworth (1992:99) states:

...‘I cannot unproblematically bring subjugated knowledges to light when I am not free of my own learned racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism, or sexism’.

The work of feminists is helpful for exploring universal notions of oppression and considering more deeply my own subject position – the recognition of my own raced, gendered and classed position and what this might mean for practice.

In this respect analysis of the 'self' - one who is in a relatively privileged position - may diminish the possibility that I might re-inscribe the very conditions I seek to remedy.

PROBLEMATISING THE SITUATED AND CONTINGENT NATURE OF IDENTITY

Critiques undertaken by feminist writers (Ellsworth, 1989, Weiler, 1991; Orner, 1992; Maher, 2001) highlight the limitations of attempting to give empowerment through voice whilst under-theorising the sheer inter-sectional nature of identity. In particular, women of colour and lesbian writers have been influential in acknowledging theoretical weaknesses concerning identity (hooks, 1989, 1994). Notwithstanding these difficulties, Freire's work has been influential among feminists. bell hooks for example, states his writing concerning education as the practice of freedom has informed both her pedagogical critical awareness and pedagogical engagement with her students (hooks, 1994:14). In her influential book *Talking Back* (1989: 12), hooks acknowledges that for women of colour 'coming to voice is an act of resistance':

... 'Speaking becomes a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to subject'.

Nevertheless, like Orner and Ellsworth, she is unconvinced by the view that any single unique voice exists that can truly epitomise identity. As hooks (1989:14) points out:

... 'it is easy for the marginal voice striving for a hearing to allow what is said to be over-determined by the needs of that majority group who appears to be listening, tuned in'.

However, although she acknowledges the sometimes sexist (his use of the male referent) in Freire's use of language, his liberatory and transformatory visions are retained.

I have found hooks' work helpful in reflecting on my positionality and the inevitability of my role as practitioner-researcher. As hooks (1989: 52) suggests this:

... 'is a position of power over others. We can use that power in ways that diminish or in ways that enrich'.

Much has been written on the notion of identity and the difficulties of conceptualising in any fixed way. Burke (2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2006) highlights the problematic nature of learners' classed, gendered and racialised notions of identity and what empowerment might mean. She points out the sheer intersectional nature of students that renders any straightforward theorisation as problematic and highlights the danger of essentialising.

The difficulty of understanding and problematising student identity and their resistance to CP was a recurring theme throughout my IFS and reared its head at almost every juncture. As I mentioned in Chapter One, it left me in something of an intellectual cul-de-sac, because if any straightforward understanding of identity is impossible and students unknowable, then how are critical pedagogues to respond? In this respect, feminist and feminist post-structuralist literature has been helpful regarding deconstructing and acknowledging issues concerning power and identity and how policy shifts in education re-articulate and re-position students.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, my feeling is that critical pedagogues need to move from rhetoric to action: that is, to get on the ground and take the struggle forward at a practice level. I wanted to use dialogical encounters with students to at least try and make known or break down these resistances and think more deeply about them.

Taken together, these concerns represent a substantial challenge and I do not want to detach myself from the kinds of pedagogical issues and struggles that are important to me. As a practitioner-researcher, greater reflexivity would undoubtedly help address these complex questions. It is certainly required in finding ways in which I can work with students in an informed way whilst acknowledging and developing context specific theories (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1991; Usher, 1997). This opens up the opportunity for developing richer and more contextually informed understandings of what teaching and learning might mean.

The thrust of this thesis represents an attempt to bring into question what I think I know of my students within the classroom and ask what I know of myself as a way of providing useful insights and a starting point for my research. My belief is that I need to engage with students in dialogical conversations, as a way of overcoming conscious/unconscious pedagogical resistances. However, I would require a methodology that allowed me to investigate the epistemological questions I wanted to pursue.

Looking more closely at structures of power located within the student body is essential: they cannot be viewed as either neutral or democratic. In focusing on non-traditional students participating in HE, it is frequently assumed (Britton & Baxter, 1994, 1999) they have shared characteristics and this is often not the case. In fact, numerous studies undertaken within FE and HE characterise mature students as multiply positioned and too complex for any clear-cut reading (Wakeford, 1994; Burke, 2002a; Waller, 2002a, 2002b; Brine & Waller, 2004; Burke, 2004; Waller 2006).

Constructions of student identity are changing away from the generally accepted, but often one-dimensional, definitions towards a range of possibilities. These create greater uncertainty and challenges for all practitioners (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Morley, 2002a, 2002b). My experience in the classroom suggests epistemological rigour may be insufficient in combating the very circumstances that prevent CP. Weiler's (1991) argument that accepting the existence of any collective notion of oppression may be a fallacy is quite convincing and approximates with my own experience of struggling with it in the classroom. In the end oppression may be unnameable and even unknowable. Further, although well-intentioned, given the contradictory experiences of what constitutes oppression in the classroom, at times I may retreat to more traditional practices rather than confront the various issues involved. Given the contingent and situated claims to knowledge and truth, as a practitioner-researcher, the idea of establishing any collective notion of oppression may be naïve and impracticable.

I am not suggesting giving up on pursuing social justice and empowerment for Access students, but conclude that acknowledging the existence of multiple identities or social positions and paying sufficient attention to different and shared experiences of oppression and/or privilege are essential. Undoubtedly, notions of identity may be further complicated by recent changes in the policy terrain (and this applies across all educational sectors) in which students and practitioners are located and is an issue to which I shall now turn.

CHAPTER 4 - CHANGES IN THE POLICY TERRAIN - TEACHING, LEARNING AND STUDENT IDENTITY

As the title of this chapter suggests, changes in the policy terrain that influence teaching, learning and student identity will be discussed. Concerning issues which resonate with grading and credentialism raised in Chapter Two, I shall initially outline the nature of neo-liberal education policy discourses before saying something about its impact on student/teacher identity and the extent to which pursuing critical practices is still viable. Finally, I consider if these changes render CP anachronistic and whether I retreat to more traditional pedagogical approaches.

Much has been written on the nature of neo-liberal education discourses and policies that go some way to re-configuring student/teacher identity, problematising the space in which to pursue progressive practices. In particular, the work of Ball (1990) and Ozga (2000) has been useful in documenting the decades leading up to the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) - the late 1960s and 1970s – a time that saw intense debate and struggle over education in England and Wales³. This represented something of a ground clearing exercise for the ideological sea changes that occurred prior to and after the 1992 Further and Higher Education Acts. Ball (1990, 2006) suggests policy documents (for example, the Black Papers) had become increasingly concerned with the problem of declining standards and progressive educational methods a perceived causal factor in this decline.

³ Many other authors (too numerous to mention) also document changes concerning the educational policy terrain. Moreover, policy initiatives of the 1970/80s (particularly managerialism and marketisation) have had a direct impact on FE colleges. Ball (1990, 1993, 1998, 2003) documents these changes in considerable detail.

In fact, by the mid-1970s the so called educational consensus was dead and the then Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan's much-publicised 1976 speech at Ruskin College, Oxford – which stimulated 'The Great Debate' on education - was an indication of forthcoming discontent concerning core curriculum, the validity and use of informal teaching methods, the role of school inspection and future examination system (Ball, 1990, 2006).⁴

This is important because it has not only shaped the discursive policy climate and debates that followed in schools, further and higher education institutions; it has heralded new and emergent critical narratives legitimatising and favouring certain views and visions of education over others. Certainly, the idea of an education system damaging the education and employment prospects for children and young people would be hard to resist by practitioners (including critical pedagogues) pursuing progressive visions of education.

Neo-liberal discourses became part of the language of policy-makers more generally and reverberated throughout the discursive field as policy debates took on a more critical perspective lending an ear to the world of business rather than progressive educators (Ball, 1990, 1993; Ozga, 2000; Ball, 2006). Much of the literature in the field documents a triumph of utilitarian and instrumental neo-liberal policies over progressive models of education. It also foregrounds the challenges of accountability and notions of quality and excellence.

⁴ Callaghan was not the first to raise these questions. First published in 1969 (followed by a second in 1971 – see Cox and Dyson, 1971), the Black Papers critiqued liberal theories and declining standards in education. There was also much debate concerning comprehensive education more generally, where indiscipline and overly politicised teachers were high on the political agenda and much publicised in the media.

The discursive strategy of the Thatcher government was to gain hegemony concerning marketisation, competition and efficiency and individual choice (Ball, 1990, 1993, 1998; McAnulla, 1998; Shore & Selwyn, 1998; Ball, 2006). Moreover, both Conservative and recent New Labour administrations were successful in establishing a hegemonic project through the deployment of binary oppositions (Ball, 1990, 1993, 1998, 2006). Typical examples include juxtaposing the consumers against that of the bureaucrat and individualism over collectivism (ibid).

Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) and Gewirtz, (2002) view this as a means of reforming and regulating progressive teaching practices previously established on welfarist models and public sector values⁵. Ozga, (2000) picks up this theme when she talks about the substitution of terms such as citizenship, equality, justice and professionalism with more 'hollowed out' concepts which are often devoid of any substantive meaning, or oppositional to what they claim to mean. Good examples of this are terms such as consumer, quality, excellence and performance. Such hegemonic discourses permeate the education - and public sector generally.

However, under New Labour, they were softened and presented as pragmatic modernising discourses providing opportunities for efficiency (Simpkins, 2000; Moore, *et al.* 2002). Although modernist discourses may appear seductive, in policy terms, education becomes devoid of any progressive qualities it might possess and presents a challenge for critical pedagogues.

⁵ There are no signs the current coalition government intends to abandon neo-liberal policy-approaches.

The consequence of an education system characterised by what Ball (1990: 18) calls a 'discourse of derision', is that it is in a state of crisis; ever tighter regulation and control is required rather than 1970s producer capture (Ball, 1990, 1993, 1998, Whitty, 2000; Ball, 2003, 2006). Superseded by more top-down managerial and modernising discourses, policy technologies concerned with meeting codified standards and measurement of performance are now all-pervasive (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Hargreaves, 2000; Simpkins, 2000; Whitty, 2000).

DOES THE NEW POLICY TERRAIN RENDER CP ANACHRONISTIC AND OUTDATED?

Indeed, Troyna (1994) and Apple (1996) highlight how neo-liberal policy discourses represent a seizure of progressive ideals traditionally associated with the political left for contradictory purposes. Such policies represent new and emergent discourses re-configuring students' identities to that of future workers and consumers with attendant rights and entitlements. As a consequence, education becomes commodified and pedagogical relationships are changed and predicated on the needs of its clients (McWilliams, Hatcher & Meadmore, 1999). Accepting this premise might imply that pedagogy aimed at personal and social transformation might well be redundant and, where quality of performance is in the ascendancy, it is unsurprising students resist progressive ideals. The policy context in which I practise is crucial to understanding pedagogical challenges in the classroom and calls for caution concerning my own critical agency. However, I believe literature in this area may be overly pessimistic and abandoning the vision and tenets of progressive pedagogues is not inevitable, nevertheless, closer scrutiny is required if the space to pursue CP is to be opened up.

SHOULD I RETREAT TO MORE TRADITIONAL PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES?

Merely accepting that recent policy shifts have re-positioned students is also questionable, and I am not convinced that students themselves automatically subscribe to the idea that they are consumers. Burke (2002a, 2002b) disputes whether students really do position themselves simply as consumers of education; many would reject consumerist identities; they may also assume different positions at different times and this possibility needs further analysis. Yet, herein lies the challenge for pedagogues committed to emancipatory practices.

Increasingly, working with pre-packaged curriculum design, and pressurised to deploy bureaucratic educational initiatives, can undermine the possibility of developing students' communicative competence. However, a degree of caution is necessary as educational sites are not necessarily the only sites for progressive social change⁶. As I have already hinted, such unrealistic expectations (promoted by some academic educators of the critical persuasion) only serve to encumber the critical project.

If the commodification of education and changed nature of pedagogical relationships discussed in this chapter are increasing resistance to CP, then more needs to be known about students' dispositions towards teaching and learning. Given the contingent nature of identity raised in Chapters Two and Three, gaining a greater understanding of student resistance to CP requires deeper exploration of the complex positions which they hold.

⁶ Other social institutions and agencies can also be sites for progressive change and social transformation. These include: the work place, media, religious institutions and the increasing role of technology in society.

Indeed, problematising my epistemological position in relation to the methodological framework I would eventually choose, and ethical considerations such as power, voice and the value of reflexivity were imperative and are issues to which I shall now turn.

CHAPTER 5 - METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONS UNDERPINNING MY RESEARCH

Thinking back to my original research question concerning why students resist CP, if I was to develop a greater understanding of the pedagogical disappointment described in Chapter One, a deeper understanding of resistance would be required. As suggested in Chapter Three, given students' social worlds are inevitably shaped by competing and contradictory discourses and positioned in multiple ways, this posed a number of methodological, ethical and practical challenges. In this chapter, I outline how I responded to these challenges and developed a research approach appropriate for investigating my research question. I justify how and why students were selected for the study and practical and ethical considerations concerning researching students within my own setting.

Thinking about questions of an ontological and epistemological nature, it is clear that some areas of research are more suited to qualitative research than others. Consideration must undoubtedly be given to whether the social phenomena under investigation are tangible or objective: something that can be measured and/or explored through more positivist paradigms. However, the nature of my professional concerns is complex, elusive and open to interpretation. I wanted to work within a research paradigm that would enable me to understand the process by which students interpreted the world: to capture the quality of students' understanding and interpretations of CP. In this sense, a qualitative research approach seemed more appropriate (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Interpretative and social constructionist ontology would provide a holistic way of deepening my understanding and gaining greater insights into how students interpret their social realities (Alvesson & Skoldburg, 2000).

This was never going to be completely straightforward because to some extent social reality can be complex and any single phenomenon may have multiple interpretations and be re-made over time (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). This posed considerable problems in relation to collecting, analysing and writing up data (the insider-researcher effect) and I address this issue in Chapter Six. Nevertheless, working within a constructivist and interpretive paradigm, my belief was that in order to make sense of the students' worlds, I should at least attempt to approach it through their perspectives and terms (Denzin, 1989a, 1989b). This informed the underpinning methodology, research design, analysis and how I would interpret and write up my data.

Although not exclusively, feminist traditions in education provided me with a less hierarchical and more collaborative research approach and were compatible for investigating my professional concerns (Ribbens, 1989; Mauthner, 1998; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998; Ribbens, & Edwards, 1998; Burke, 2002a, 2002b; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). In particular, feminists informed my epistemological position, helping me develop a methodological framework. Problematizing the difficulty of establishing identity, they acknowledge the sheer complexity and sometimes messiness of classroom life. As I have already stated, by recognising the multiple positioning of subjectivity, they acknowledge the limitations of attempting to give empowerment through voices that are frequently nuanced, discursively produced and always partial (Ellsworth, 1989; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Weiler, 1991; Orner, 1992; Gore, 1992, 1993; Ellsworth, 1997; Maher, 2001; Burke, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2006; Burke & Jackson, 2007).

Paying attention to issues concerning power, knowledge and subjectivity throughout the research process provided a way of engaging with the students in a collaborative and non-hierarchical way. I was aware that whilst being empathetic to and having a close relationship with students might be helpful, there were risks attached to the interpreting and writing up the voices of the less powerful and I wanted to minimise these.

The work of feminist post-structuralist educators was helpful in thinking through how I would collect, analyse, interpret and write up the data (Britzman, 1991; Ellsworth, 1997). Aware that ultimately I would be responsible for the analysis and interpretation of data, recognising that language could both limit and reveal the lived realities of those involved in research, I found their work insightful for thinking about how students would be represented in text. Moreover, it was a starting point for acknowledging possible ethical considerations that might occur and how I would manage them. I wanted students to have a voice and be heard, however, at the same time, I realised that research methods intended to be non-hierarchical and emancipatory could have unintended consequences.

As literature already cited in Chapter Three suggests, discourses of empowerment can be contradictory and contested. Recognising the dichotomous position between researchers and researched could silence, marginalise or exclude certain voices required serious consideration. My concern was that without careful consideration it could lead to exploitation and impoverish the authenticity and trustworthiness of my research (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1991).

Feminist poststructuralist paradigms provide a way of problematising power relationships within research relationships and were insightful in terms of how I would write up the data and the extent to which, through critical reflexivity, I could address the problems of representation. As an insider-researcher, I could not deny or under-play my own subjectivity within the research process: it would be a crucial issue throughout (Walkerdine, 1997). Considering how I would interpret the students' narratives and represent their truths was undoubtedly an issue. Maynard (1994: 23) suggest that:

... 'Post-structuralist thinking clearly demonstrates that the very act of speaking about experience is to culturally and discursively constitute it'. People's accounts of their lives are culturally embedded'.

The very articulation of voice - who is speaking for whom and when and where in the research process - was going to be crucial to ensuring authentic representation of student voices. Feminist writers critique the problem of research that, perhaps unsurprisingly, concerns itself with issues and interests important to the researcher and possibly to the detriment of the researched (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Ramazanoglu, 1989).

In this respect, developing a holistic and reflexive methodological framework was pivotal in ensuring student views would be acknowledged throughout the research process (Maynard, 1994; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998). The work of Mauthner and Doucet (1998, 2003) was particularly useful in engaging with this problem. As they point out:

... 'While the importance of being reflexive is acknowledged within social science research, the difficulties, practicalities and methods of doing it are rarely addressed. Thus, the implications of current theoretical and philosophical discussions about reflexivity (in) research practice remain under-developed' (2003: 413).

Through close examination of what is said or unsaid the dialogic nature of the interview situation is an important one. Using a reflexive methodological framework would be essential for making known student understandings: their attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and experiences and how they structure, define and talk about their worlds. Using what I will refer to as unstructured conversations, my aim was to generate creative insights for thinking about and re-invigorating CP.

Given the contingencies of classroom life, I felt the most practicable approach to investigating student perception in a more nuanced way was to engage in discussion with them; in sum, asking how CP was for them. This would at least provide a way of getting inside and finding out more about classroom contingencies and situatedness of subjectivity that render critical discourses as abstracted and overly theoretical. In short, I intended to encourage the students to reflect on their pedagogical experiences and perceptions during their time on the Access programme and/or at university.

SELECTING STUDENTS FOR THE STUDY

It was important that students reflected on the pedagogical approaches they experience on our Access programme. However, regarding sampling learners from another institution, although useful, I could not be sure they would have the same experience of CP as my students. I already knew something about specific students and pedagogical events in which they were involved and the types of teaching and learning approaches to which they were frequently exposed. In undertaking research in my own setting I was struggling with a long-held set of professional concerns, that was both frustrating yet intriguing.

In this sense, my professional concerns and research questions emerged from and are strongly related within my own setting (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000). I did consider similar settings to my own (there were quite a few) and the theoretical and practical considerations of doing so. From my own experience of working as part of an OCNSER Widening Participation group and other local FE institutions, I was convinced the student profile, both at local and national level is very similar.

Data produced by QAA (2010) also supported and concurred with my student profile. On a more practical note, my choice was reduced to a straightforward decision between undertaking research in my own setting or abandoning my desire to conduct an ethnographic study. At this point it is important to state however, that I wanted to expand on the range and number of students researched in my IFS. Investigating previous Access students who are now at university would indeed be valuable in providing additional and a richer source of data. Nonetheless, I had to be pragmatic about issues such as time, access and suitability and availability of students.

After making preliminary enquiries with other local colleges with a similar demographic and social/cultural profile, it became clear that access to their students was never going to be straightforward, not guaranteed and profiling them would have been even more problematic. Indeed, I was not confident that working in an alternative setting would have been advantageous. I also had to consider the likely effect of being the outsider-researcher and considered the possibility of being treated with suspicion.

Asking students about pedagogical approaches and their satisfaction with it might have been viewed simply as another form of surveillance. I was concerned that my presence in a setting other than my own might be viewed as prying and was aware of the potential for creating anxiety or distress in both students and fellow practitioners. Moreover, when the research was published I did not want it to harm or have negative consequences for them. In addition to ethical and methodological considerations, there were practical ones too.

Working within my own setting, if necessary, I could easily change dates and times and if there were problems with rooming and other practical concerns, I could at least resolve these problems more easily. My own setting was ideal because, having developed a solid working relationship with students built over time and based on trust, I had accumulated greater knowledge about them. Of course this would be double-edged as I had to consider how I would reduce the interviewer-effect and do my best to both acknowledge and minimise this. Nevertheless, I was confident that the rapport, trust and confidence of students in me made it more feasible to investigate sensitive issues such as their perception of CP.

I viewed the research process as one of discovery and exploration, focusing on students' experiences and significant pedagogical events (Guba & Lincoln 1989; Robson, 2002). In this sense I endeavoured to explore quality rather than quantity of data (Frankfort-Nachmias, 1996). I wanted to at least select the type of students whose qualities or experiences would permit an understanding of the phenomena and who would be information rich. Although this was always going to require some sort of trade off, I deliberately selected students who I could be sure would have had some exposure to critical practices.

As previously mentioned, not all students would have had exposure to critical approaches because not all practitioners employ CP or only partially engage with it. Although I selected a relatively small sample (eleven students), it was quite in keeping with the nature of the qualitative data I wanted to generate⁷. Further, I tried to ensure they reflected the demographics, location and profile of my local OCNSER provider. I reflected long and hard on the notion of incorporating extreme resistors to illuminate my research questions. However, in a practical sense I felt they would be difficult to locate and could not be sure they would come forward: they may of course have been resistors to me personally or to other colleagues and I did not want them to be vulnerable or feel stigmatised.

Because they were either existing or previous students, gaining access to them was not difficult, particularly in the case of students now in their second and third years at university. Nonetheless, selecting a representative group in terms of the claims I might make and generating meaningful data was more of a challenge. Yet working with them enabled me to obtain the data I required, and at the same time, immerse myself more deeply in their experiences.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND HOW I ADDRESSED THEM

As far as the College was concerned, I was a little constrained in terms of the time frame. Although I did have plenty of students to select from, realistically speaking, this year's students could only be chosen from current students. I did want my student-group to be as typical as possible and achieving a balance by gender, age and ethnicity was not a problem. However, class was more problematic as it intersects gender, age and ethnicity and cannot automatically be read off.

⁷ I had planned on using 12 students but one dropped out due to health issues.

Although I got to know more about the students' lives as the academic year(s) have progressed, any judgements I made concerning their backgrounds and identities would always be partial. As suggested in Chapter Two, their experiences are often nuanced and contingent. Moreover, attempting to conceptualise or contextualise their experiences might well be an oversimplification of their lived realities (Britton & Baxter, 1994; Williams, 1997; Tett, 2000; Reay, 2003; Brine & Waller, 2004; Waller, 2006; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). In spite of these difficulties, as an experienced practitioner, I was in an ideal position to select students by virtue of teaching and research undertaken with Access students over many years.

Drawing on ethnographic and collaborative research methods and using unstructured conversations, I conducted my study between April and July 2010. I chose this period because at this point of the year students were approaching the end of their studies and would be more able to reflect on their pedagogical experiences and journeys. Piloting work I had previously undertaken during my IFS suggested that if I had conducted unstructured conversations earlier, I could not be confident students would be in a position to understand terminology and have anything concrete to reflect on or say.

This was always the struggle in researching such a sensitive area and is something I have wrestled with prior to and throughout the research process. I interviewed four groups of students: one group comprised six students currently progressing through the Access programme, whereas the other three were at various stages in their degree programmes.

The groups were broken down in the following way:

- Group 1 - comprised six students currently progressing through the Access programme (Alyson, Amelia, Becky, Beverley, Sean and Sue);
- Group 2 – comprised two students mid-way through their first year at university (Denis and Michael);
- Groups 3 & 4 - comprised three students, one (Donna) in their second year at university and two (Yvonne and Rebecca) approaching the end of the third years at university.

I already knew students in groups three and four and having passed through the programme, I was confident they would have plenty to say. The unstructured conversations were conducted on an individual basis and lasted between forty and sixty minutes. They were recorded on a Dictaphone and I also used a notepad to record additional notes and extraneous, but possibly important, details such as student body language, or ambiguity. Although there are no formal working guidelines concerning how to conduct unstructured conversations, in practice there are some basic guiding principles adopted by other researchers and I tried to follow these (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Berg, 1998).

However, I decided to use an aide-memoire as a broad guide to key topic issues, themes that might be covered, rather than actual questions to be asked. I had to consider the advantages and disadvantages of using such an approach. It was a good match in terms of my epistemological position and questions I was investigating. It also provided me with additional flexibility, allowing me to explore the underlying motives of student responses. The use of focused pedagogical topics did not preclude students articulating anything else they wanted to raise, but I had to be careful that I stayed within the topic area.

All students felt they were fully informed regarding the processes and desired outcomes of my research as well as the method of dissemination. Preparing possible discussion topics through the use of an aide-memoire makes it sound as if they were semi-structured, in that there was some level of control. Nevertheless, they could still be regarded as unstructured because the wording, sequencing and direction of questions were not predetermined; rather they were subject to revision according to student response and the significance of issues arising.

This went some way towards achieving a balance between flexibility and consistency. It also provided a preliminary first step in thinking about how student narratives could be organised and presented (Briggs, 2000). I had to think about what to ask and carefully phrase questions and sensitively probe and prompt throughout the unstructured conversations. Each interview was different and I encouraged students to speak frankly and give as much detail as possible. Patton (1990) warns against asking questions that might impose interpretations on social phenomena and I wanted to minimise this. I avoided asking directive questions, which might have led students through the unstructured conversations, eliciting responses they might have thought I wanted. In terms of epistemological positions underpinning my research approach, working within feminist, post-structuralist and critical traditions was helpful in avoiding treating students as entities with pre-given identities. Giving them a voice and trying to ensure they would be heard would really influence and shape the methodological approaches and key research decisions taken (Giroux, 1988a, 1988b; Ribbens, 1989; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998; Burke, 2002a, 2002b; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

Avoiding set questions and response categories that might conflate narratives concerning potential issues was really important. It was not simply a case of trying to avoid this; it was essential in helping move the unstructured conversations beyond what I simply wanted to discuss or my concerns, towards important issues possibly overlooked or not anticipated during the design stage. It would also enable students to tell their stories, potentially capturing more detailed experiences. I wanted to clarify ambiguities in the students' responses, as a way of discovering answers to questions that might have been difficult to anticipate when planning the research.

Working from the universal to the particular, my approach was to investigate initial research questions, refining and sensitising student responses and developing theory as the research progressed. Being reflexive and incorporating diverse responses that might inevitably emerge in the student narratives and factoring them in would be essential. Conceptualised this way, student rather than practitioner-led dialogic encounters could potentially liberate both of us. It would be very easy to repeat the same weaknesses that can be attributed to the critical movement. Whilst trying to relocate students within the research process, at the same time, I ran the risk of reinforcing the prevailing state of affairs concerning power, participation and articulation of voice. The potential would always exist for student experiences and perspectives to be silenced, downplayed or essentialised and Orner (1992: 75) cautioned against perpetuating:

...‘relations of domination in the name of liberation because they do not sufficiently consider the intersection of identity, language, context, and power that inform all pedagogical relations’.

As a practitioner-researcher, I have really tried to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ethics and power relations in relation to the epistemological questions I have been trying to investigate, as a way of diminishing the 'impositional potential of liberatory efforts' (ibid). I was in no doubt that an ethic of care and responsibility towards my students was necessary. I wanted to act in such a way that ethical decisions were undertaken in a compassionate way. For this to happen I had to think deeply, concerning ethical dilemmas that might arise and I discuss this in more depth in pages 70-76 and Chapter Six.

Undoubtedly, power relationships might surface in relation to my own ontological perspectives and knowledge, which are in themselves inescapably linked to other forms of structural power (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002). Addressing the power relationships in research (in whose interests is research undertaken) and ensuring all students involved were in no way exploited or disempowered was crucial. This necessitated thinking reflexively concerning the potential negative effects (maleficence) of my research on the researched. I may well have chosen research themes and methods appropriate for investigating resistance to CP. At the same time however, I realised that pursuing these in a disinterested way would be almost impossible (Freire, 1973; Lather, 1991). Reflexivity would be required at all stages of my research and caution exercised concerning generalising beyond my own institutional setting. As an insider-researcher, I needed to consider whether consciously or unconsciously, my own personal, political and theoretical biography would be crucial to the authenticity and trustworthiness of my findings. In this respect, questions concerning power, negotiation, dialogue and an ethic of care would be central to the research process.

I have drawn on a substantive body of literature as a way of problematising the role of the insider-researcher and difficulties concerning power relations, accountability, authority and legitimation of knowledge (Skeggs, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Robson, 2002). Ethical and political concerns of the nature already mentioned would always arise and were addressed in ways which were informed and situated rather than formal and abstract (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Denzin, 2005).

ETHICAL CONCERNS AND DILEMMAS - PROBLEMATISING MY POSITION AS A PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER

Consciously or not, I was in effect choosing a research approach reflecting particular theoretical and ontological concerns. Because of this, recognising I might focus on certain concerns, whilst disregarding others, was essential (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Anderson & Jack, 1991; Riessman, 1993; Berger, 1977; Borland, 2004).

The best I could do was to trace and document my data analysis processes, and the choices and decisions I made along the way – to be as transparent as possible. At least other researchers could see for themselves what had been lost and/or gained in the process. Furthermore, I needed to document the reflexive processes undertaken; not just in general terms such as my class, gender and ethnic background, but also more concrete ones. For example, the where, how and why particular decisions were made at given points in my research and I tried to do this throughout.

There was an overwhelming danger that my research might be contaminated by lack of ethical consideration for the students. This would run counter to my concerns for giving them a voice through unstructured conversations as a way of moving in a more democratic and participatory direction. Yes, I was conducting the conversations and writing up my findings for an EdD thesis and wanted the result to be a valuable study, but was aware that my intentions might easily be open to criticism. The challenge was to deal with the researcher-effect in a coherent and transparent way. I am not saying my research can ever truly be neutral, but reflexivity and transparency concerning method, methodology and possible ethical challenges, would go some way to addressing dilemmas that might arise.

Giving students a voice concerning their perceptions of CP, whilst necessary to the research process, posed a number of ethical dilemmas. I already had certain experiences and ontological hunches and inevitably my subjectivity positioned me within the research process. In this respect, there was always a danger of claiming to be speaking about students, but really speaking for them (Spivak, 1988; Alcoff, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1993; Alcoff, 1994). I had to consider the problem of attempting to speak for others: what Alcoff calls an act of representation and process of interpretation. This has been helpful in thinking about my position as a practitioner-researcher and developing an ethically and methodologically sound research framework. Critically re-examining my position and values as the thesis progressed was crucial and required an ongoing reflexive approach. Conscious I was speaking from a position of relative privilege, presupposing students could have a voice in the research was problematic. For example, they might not always have the necessary self-knowledge and confidence to do this.

It was no good pretending I was not located within the research and I really had to think hard about whether someone using the same approach would get different results (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1999). In order to avoid repositioning students outside of the process, I had to be constantly aware of this factor (Richardson, 1990; Skeggs, 1994; Richardson, 1997).

As a way of addressing these difficulties I reviewed my actions and predispositions throughout (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). I made additional notes documenting thoughts, feelings and concerns I might have and recorded significant events as a way of situating, contextualising and validating my data. This was invaluable for detailing factors that might otherwise been considered extraneous, yet influential to the research process, data analysis and eventual findings. These included issues such as student body language, power relations or unplanned interruptions. However, in spite of my best attempts, whether I was reading, writing or reporting, my neutrality would always be questionable and there is a substantial body of literature problematising the challenge of maintaining impartiality (Lather, 1991; Usher, 1997).

Working within the statement of ethical practice for the British Sociological Association (BSA) and British Educational Research Association (BERA), I tried to ensure I was responsive concerning issues that may have arisen throughout the research. Taking responsibility for my ethical practice, I was aware that I had to safeguard the interests of my students and report my findings accurately and truthfully. The BSA (2002: 2) believes researchers should strive to ensure that:

... 'the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research. They should strive to protect the rights of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy, while recognising the difficulty of balancing potentially conflicting interests'.

Avoiding alienating the students, I considered the impact my research might have on them - both during and after the research process, taking the steps necessary, ensuring they understood the process in which they were engaged. This included why their participation was necessary, how it would be used and to whom data and findings would be disseminated. Gaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity was essential and acknowledging that although the research process might appear reasonably straightforward, this might not be the case.

Thinking about how my research might impinge on both students and colleagues was a serious matter. As an insider-researcher my dual role had the potential to introduce explicit tensions (BERA, 2004). Securing my students' voluntary informed consent, before research got underway, was essential. I recognised and informed both students and colleagues that if either were uncomfortable, they had the right to withdraw from the research, for any reason, at any time. Notwithstanding these considerations, I reflected on whether anything I did would contribute to them withdrawing and the extent to which a change of approach might persuade re-engagement. For the students, any mention of an interview - unstructured or otherwise - could have made them anxious concerning what might arise, how information might be made public and in what ways⁸. My colleagues were concerned too, but for different reasons. Of particular concern was that during the unstructured conversations, the students either individually or collectively, might express concerns about their teachers' performance.

⁸ Under the BSA statement of ethical practice I had to consider the effects of their involvement and the consequences, meeting laws and administrative regulations (for example Data Protection Acts, the Human Rights Act, copyright and libel laws) which affects the conduct of research, data dissemination and storage, publication, rights of research subjects, of sponsors and employers.

Although I was able to assure them that all information would remain confidential, I could never be sure of alleviating all their anxieties. Nonetheless, I negotiated with students and colleagues reaching an agreement concerning how data would be collected reported and disseminated (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1999).

Consideration of legal requirements (as set down in the Data Protection Act, 1998) in relation to the storage and use of personal data was crucial. Students had a right to know how and why their personal data was being stored, to what uses it was being put and to whom it may be made available (ibid). I agreed with the students that any disclosure of information to a third party would have to be agreed by them.

Even though I was well-intentioned, I had to think about how research design and methodology might still be 'characterised by disparities of power and status', recognising that establishing 'trust and integrity' throughout would be essential (BSA, 2004: 3). In this respect, explaining the details of my research, why it was being undertaken and how my findings would be disseminated was important. This included the potential to alter content, withdraw statements and/or provide additional information; for example, adding to or contextualising interpretations.

Where practicable, data analysis, interpretation and the writing up stages of the research was characterised by collaboration. I hoped it would allow me to retain a grasp over the somewhat ambiguous boundaries that exist between narrative and interpretation. In this respect, developing collaborative and interactive relationships with students, and acknowledging their viewpoints, contributed towards a less hierarchical research process.

Including them as an intrinsic part of the research process with access to transcripts of unstructured conversations and research findings, was paramount in maintaining trust. However, analysis and interpretation of data would be critical to the authenticity and trustworthiness of my findings. Further, as a way of addressing issues concerning power and control, I must reiterate that reflexivity would be fundamental.

The problem of writing up voices of the less powerful was ever-present. I considered the production of knowledge to be an ethical endeavour and wanted the process to be as egalitarian as possible. This was characterised by decisions made during the analysis and interpretive stage concerning itself with which voices I would focus on and those I could potentially be silencing. The process of writing and representing students' narratives to an academic audience could also reinforce inequalities of power and I say more about this in Chapters Six and Seven.

As already mentioned, a distinctive set of themes emerged from my IFS concerning student perceptions of CP and at the start of the thesis I had three key questions:

1. How do Access to HE students engage with CP and why do some resist?
2. What are the underlying motivations behind students' rhetorical and discursive positions towards CP?
3. How might critical practitioners support Access to HE students with fragile learner identities through the programme?

If I was going to get any sense concerning why my pedagogical intentions sometimes misfire or fail to connect, listening to and establishing a deeper understanding of the students' personal worlds would be crucial.

I wanted them to express their views in relation to the rationales and discursive positions underpinning resistance. This would require getting a more nuanced understanding concerning how student narratives were located in relation to their own biographies; a more holistic approach that would acknowledge familial relations, friends and significant others and wider societal networks.

USING THE VOICE CENTRED RELATIONAL (VCR) METHOD - WHO GETS HEARD?

Having highlighted the difficulty of attempting to speak for others and the overlap between speaking for and about others, acknowledging my subjectivity, the context of the study and different student viewpoints was essential (Denzin, 1989a; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, 2003). However, it was clear that although necessary, attempting to sift and order my data reflexively could potentially be one-sided or exclusionary. As already mentioned, research is never completely neutral or value-free because they are imbued with the epistemological, ontological and theoretical assumptions of the researcher (Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000).

Notwithstanding the difficulties this might raise in terms of time constraints, students' level of knowledge and commitment to the research process, I hoped it would allow me to preserve a grasp over the often blurred boundaries that sometime exist between narrative and interpretation. Avoiding more objective methods that had the potential to separate and fragment student narratives, I wanted to look at the interrelatedness of their stories as a way of making them more meaningful. As a way of overcoming these difficulties I used a Voice-Centred Relational (VCR) methodological framework for translating the interrelatedness of student narratives (a relational ontology) into concrete methods of data analysis.

Principally associated with the work of Gilligan *et al.* (2003) and consistent with reflexive and collaborative approaches, it moves both researchers and researched to acknowledge the practicalities and ethics of undertaking.

Mauthner and Doucet have modified and extended this for use in the sociological field and as a way of addressing ambiguities located in interpretive work researchers undertake moving from voice to text. Indeed, their method has been used in a number of disciplines and across various social groups⁹. Having already acknowledged that my analytical line of enquiry could never be truly neutral concerning students' subjectivities and understanding of knowledge-construction, I had to at least find a way of situating and making these difficulties known at the interpretative stage.

I was confident that students' stories would not necessarily emerge in any neat narrative order; acknowledging these difficulties was fundamentally important (Ribbens & Edward, 1998). The challenge was giving students a voice within the data whilst trying to avoid them being silenced or misunderstood. Using Mauthner and Doucet's VCR method, I adopted their four-strand approach for the reading of the unstructured conversations. This provided an insightful way of getting at the variety of feelings and orientations students expressed themselves and in relation to significant others and wider societal concerns. The value of this approach is that it offers the possibility for developing a more equitable way to research relationships, acknowledging differences that may exist.

⁹ Developed within a psychological paradigm it is concerned with listening for and locating 'voices' within narrative accounts (see Brown *et al.* 1988, 1989).

The four-strand approach to reading student narratives can be summarised in the following way:

1. **Reading for the plot** - Where as the reader I respond to student narratives;
2. **Reading for the 'voice' by pronouns 'I' 'we' 'you'** - For individual students' self-perception concerning identity and positioning;
3. **Reading for relationships** - With significant others and family and friends;
4. **Placing people within cultural contexts and social structures** - Reading for relationships with wider societal concerns.

Reading student transcripts, I would listen to and consider my role as reader and interpreter of the various voices and how I was relating to their stories. In this respect, the VCR method provided a way of interpreting data concerning student perceptions through a democratic methodological approach for interpreting narrative. Stressing the importance of listening attentively to what is spoken and/or is absent it endeavours to ensure all speakers are heard. Calling for more attentiveness concerning reactions and feelings to what is being said and making these known, it provided a reflexive counterweight to my subjectivity (ibid).

Feminist writers suggest that too little attention has been paid to issues of power and exploitation when researchers are at the data analysis and interpretative stage of the research process (for good examples see the work of Glucksmann, 1994; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). Acknowledging these concerns provides a way of overcoming possible predetermined ideas and beliefs researchers might bring to research and how this might skew interpretation of data (Olesen, 1994; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997; Devine & Heath, 1999).

Researchers are encouraged to reflect on and record their interpretations and are reminded that the validity of their interpretations is dependent on being able to demonstrate how they were reached (Boulton & Hammersley, 1996). In this respect, making known choices and decisions made concerning the gathering and transmission of data was crucial (Olesen, 1994). It helped develop a more nuanced way of listening to student stories and a way of thinking deeply about the extent to which emerging themes resonated with or railed against my subjectivity.

The first strand of Mauthner & Doucet's (1998, 2003) VCR method, that is, reading the plot and responses to the narrative, is concerned with reading as a way of revealing significant events, protagonists and sub-plots and listening for recurrent images, words, metaphors and contradictions in student narratives. Using this approach, I read the various narratives, reflecting on how I was responding emotionally and intellectually to what was being said. Undoubtedly, it called for considerable thought concerning how theoretical interpretations of narratives are arrived at and conceived.

Looking at notable events, significant actors, scenarios and relationships, as the listener and reader, I considered who was telling what story. Furthermore, as I traced individual stories I tried to locate myself, theoretically, socially and emotionally in relation to the various narratives, highlighting recurring words and themes, contradictions, inconsistencies in student stories¹⁰.

¹⁰ Mauthner and Doucet's adaptation of the method involved four distinct readings of interview transcripts, each time listening and highlighting particular aspects of the narrative with different coloured pens. The basic materials required to use the VCR method are coloured pencils, tapes and transcripts of interviews, combined with time to engage in multiple readings of transcripts.

This provided a way of problematising the implicit values I might or might not share with the teller, and its implications for how student understandings and interpretations might be articulated (Brown & Gilligan, 1991). Ultimately, this first way of reading the various narratives provided an underpinning democratic ethic.

The second reading assists the listener in hearing how narrators might speak of themselves - their sense of agency and social location. Mauthner & Doucet (1998, 2003) suggest that the second time you read through a transcript it should be for the voice of the 'I'. Using their approach I considered a number of key questions in relation to student stories. These included how they felt about themselves, the degree to which they felt confident in what they were saying and the extent to which they might hide behind the use of *you*, *them*, *us* or *we*, when actually they were referring to *I* and its repetition within the unstructured conversations. This was helpful as a way of gaining insight into how students worked out their sense of agency within their own lives and was often very profound.

Reading this way provided me with a means of tracing how the students represented themselves in the various narratives. Moreover, the significance of when, where and how students used personal pronouns (*I*, *we*, *you*) in talking about themselves, indicating changes in self-perception, were important (ibid). In this way, reading for the voice in the *I*, as an intersection between the way students speak of themselves in relation to their perceptions of CP and how these compare with my own interpretations provided a useful starting point for what was to follow. The first and second strands for readings of narrative accounts acknowledge content, significant persons and events, contextualising the various ways in which students tell their stories.

Unquestionably, reading the personal pronoun statements helped me to reflect on students' experiences, feelings and how they were speaking about themselves. Scrutinising how they alternated between using *I*, *we* and *you*, also provided a way of acknowledging different and multi-layered voices, rather than subsuming them within my own theoretical and ontological perspectives. Focusing on and listening for the narrator, the third reading concentrates on how students speak concerning inter-relationships with others and the stories that flowed from them.

Reading this way, I was listening for what was being spoken about, relationships with others, and how or why these might change. I considered possible relationships implicit within individual narratives, including those between home, family and significant others and identities of students. Furthermore, thinking about the way they talked about these relationships, it was possible to identify contradictions, tensions and underlying values underpinning individual identity.

The fourth (final) reading was about locating the students within their cultural contexts and social structures. My concern was to get a better understanding of how they interacted with their environments and the unspoken structures, and constructs informing their stories. As a result, I was better able to situate student narratives within broader contexts from which they so often spoke. Moreover, it also enabled me to develop a more nuanced understanding of their personal situations (frequently out of their control) and how this might affect construction of identity or sense of personal autonomy. I listened to the interview transcripts focusing concerning how the students experienced the particular social context from within which they were speaking.

Mauthner and Doucet (1998, 2003) highlight the potential analytic return from the reading and re-reading of interview transcripts (from various viewpoints) in resisting cultural definitions and stereotypes. Exploring the relationships between students' social locations as a way of problematising power dimensions and subjectivities (for example gender, race, and social class) within interpersonal relationships were helpful in achieving this. However, their method of data analysis, with its emphasis on the four readings, was invaluable at the interpretive stage, but the thematic breaking down of the data was more challenging. Data analysis was never going to be a discrete phase of the research process and my analysis began as the transcripts became available. Listening to the students' stories, I thought deeply about what I was hearing and how I was feeling and this was a stimulating yet sometimes exhaustive process.

ISSUES CONCERNING POWER AND VOICE - THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF REFLEXIVITY

There were a number of advantages and disadvantages to using the VCR methodological framework, although on the whole, the former outweighed the latter. In this section I shall explore why it was not only helpful in ensuring the students would have a voice throughout the unstructured conversations, but also at the data analysis stage. Requiring considerable attention, I was aware that ethical issues would inevitably arise as I wrote up and presented my data. I had to consider that whilst listening to and analysing the students' narratives, there was a possibility I might overlook my position as the narrator of their stories (Drake, 2010). Although on occasions time consuming, the four readings approach helped me consider the multi-dimensional nature of the unstructured conversations and follow various voices across and within individual student transcripts (Mauthner & Doucet in Ribbens, 1998).

As way of postponing the reductionist stage of data analysis and assigning segments of narrative into pre-existing categories or traditional theoretical frameworks, I could work in a more holistic way (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, 2003). However, the students' narratives would inexorably be located and produced within particular social contexts - the research relationship being one of them.

I could never fully detach my own belief and opinions from the research process and had to consider those located within theoretical approaches or research interests I was bringing to the analysis, interpretation and writing up of my findings. Putting reflexivity at the heart of careful reading and re-reading of the various narratives, I at least tried to make known the relationships that exist between the students and my role within the research process. To use Mauthner and Doucet's (2003: 424) words:

...‘the more researchers can be self-conscious about, and articulate, their role in research processes and products, the more the readers can engage in symbolic dialogues with the author(s) and the more their confidence in the work will increase’.

I really wanted to give students the opportunity to articulate their views, yet think consciously about how this was being undertaken. To this end, I believe my methodological and analytical standpoint was compatible with the professional concerns I was investigating and, within the research context, I was genuinely respectful of students and the stories they wanted to tell.

Calling for greater reflexivity concerning the researchers and researched, the VCR method increased the likelihood that issues concerning interpretation and representation were at the heart of the analytical process (Brown & Gilligan, 1991).

Thinking about my positionality in relation to the students, even though I intended to listen to and write up the unstructured conversations verbatim, as the researcher, my subjectivity might somehow affect the interpretation of data. I asked myself repeatedly whether I could honestly present the students' narratives in a way that would be recognisable to them. Calling for attention regarding whose voices are listened to and represented, feminist traditions are invaluable in placing issues of privilege and power centre-stage within the research process. I found Mauthner and Doucet and other feminist literature helpful in bringing reflexivity and rigour into the research process. However, the literature has been less helpful in how I could actually present the various narratives within the actual research process; particularly at the data analysis stage, and this was a challenge. At the analytical and interpretive stages of my research it was fundamental to avoid diluting, diminishing or even eliminating the students' voices.

I was faced with the dilemma concerning whether I should present student narratives as distinct areas related to the four relational readings or as generic accounts. There was also a problem because although helpful in addressing and diminishing ethical concerns associated with insider-research, there was still no guarantee my voice could ever be truly absent. This required reflection concerning the extent to which either the students' or my own story might be narrated. The implication of writing for a particular audience was an issue and avoiding either amplifying or diminishing the various voices would be crucial in maintaining authenticity.

There is always a predicament concerning the authenticity of my analysis because as Drake (2010: 96) suggests:

...‘theories about methodology arise from the researcher’s understandings, even though these are also based on expressed perspectives of others. These understandings are formed through the researcher’s experience, enhanced by the perception of and dialogue with others, and his or her position in the world’.

Attempting to interpret the student narratives into distinct themes might be tantamount to an appropriation of their voices for my own purposes. Undoubtedly, my personal biography and theoretical and ontological frameworks used to explore and interpret the student narratives would always be present and foregrounding this problem was important. Although satisfied the VCR framework provided an ethically sound and methodologically rigorous approach to data analysis, like all research methods it had its limitations.

Separating the four readings and presenting in narrative themes was quite problematic. Listening to the narratives, at times I felt there were similarities and overlaps between the different readings. I also worried I might be disproportionately analysing some voices and paying less attention to others. Nevertheless, I was able to immerse myself completely and listen attentively to stories, contradictions and sub-plots in relation to wider macro-structural issues.

Throughout the process I read and re-read the emerging narratives and meaning of stories and recorded emerging similarities, differences and overlaps across and within student narratives. Reflecting upon and acknowledging my personal autobiography - both political and intellectual - would be crucial regarding where I would be located in relation to the researched and being transparent about this (Harding, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1993; Maynard, 1994).

Listening to and understanding student lives on their own terms has been an enduring concern for feminist researchers and drawing attention to the dilemmas of presenting the private and personal social worlds of the researched (Gilligan, 1982; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998; Gilligan, *et al.* 2003). Their work has been both insightful and helpful for thinking reflexively about how the student voices might be spoken of within the text without silencing, misconstruing or misrepresenting what is said. Maher (2001:20) for example, suggests that:

... 'To simply encourage the expression of everyone's experiences, or voices, is in fact to encourage the more privileged voices and often to contain the marginalised voices within the terms set by the most privileged'.

This is exactly the point Spivak and Alcoff allude to - a crisis of representation. I asked myself, how the student voices would be prioritised, in what order and what weighting would be given? As Spivak (1988: 308) points out in her influential essay, the question is not whether the 'subaltern can speak', whether speech is really possible, and who might listen and how? As an insider-researcher I exercised power and control in the process of writing up student narratives and this raised two key areas of concern. I would have to think about my presentational approach. Stylistically speaking, I considered the language I might use, reflecting on the potential this might have in perpetuating certain knowledge (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). The challenge was bearing in mind the interests of those I was writing for and those whom I was writing about. The predicament was in writing up the data in a language acceptable to the academic community whilst not alienating them (ibid).

However, as a methodological device for demonstrating rigour, the notion of reflexivity has not gone uncriticised (Skeggs, 1994; Troyna, 1994; Adkins, 2002a, 2002b; Skeggs, 2002). In particular, the work of Adkins and Skeggs challenges some of the difficulties I have already raised and limitations as a transformatory practice. Adkins (2002b) draws a distinction between self-reflexivity and what constitutes good or bad research. Put simply, more reflexive accounts are often more positively positioned and this was a concern, but I tried to maintain transparency and honesty.

I had to acknowledge that as a transformatory tool, it retained the potential for maintaining my privileged position (Adkins, 2002a, 2002b; Skeggs, 2002). In spite of some of its limitations, reflexive questioning was important in reflecting on the implications of my own practice within what are essentially discourses of power. Engaging in reflexive and ethical practices entails a strong commitment with social and political contexts in which one works and provides an intellectual framework for research (Ribbens, 1989). Nonetheless, in spite of its limitations, I take responsibility for the kinds of research decisions made rather than deny I do not have power and tried to document this in a transparent way. As Mathner and Doucet (1998: 138) suggest:

... 'The best we can do then is to trace and document our data analysis processes, and the choices and decisions we make, so that other researchers and interested parties can see for themselves some of what has been lost and some of what has been gained'.

Rossman and Rallis (1998) point out, the researcher's biography not only shapes their work; it is crucial in understanding the setting of the lives of those being researched and in turn, how the researched make sense of the researcher.

Undeniably, constructing a framework for analysis and interpretation and closing the gap between abstract epistemological discussions and research practice was a challenge. However, their method of data analysis, with its emphasis on the four readings, was helpful at the interpretive stage, but the thematic breaking down of the data was a challenge. Listening to the students' stories, I thought deeply about what I was hearing and how I was feeling and this was a stimulating yet sometimes exhaustive process.

Having considered possible ethical and practical dilemmas concerning my methodological framework and the selection and accessibility to students, in the next chapter, as I move from voice to text, I consider my position in more depth. I reflect on the challenge involved in moving from the four ways of reading student narratives through to the data analysis and the interpretive stage. Issues concerning privilege, researcher-power and reflexivity are also considered in relation to the three narrative themes presented in Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER 6 - ANALYSING AND PRESENTING THE DATA - MOVING FROM VOICE TO TEXT

In this chapter I examine the problem of power in research relationships and consider how students' voices would be represented in my research findings - how their stories would be told. Putting reflexivity at the heart of careful reading and re-reading of the various narratives, I reflect on the difficulties of attempting to represent often marginalised groups. Thinking back to Chapter One and my professional concern for empowering previously marginalised learners, to re-invoke Ellsworth's words:

... 'Critical pedagogies are always implicated in the very structures they are trying to change' (Ellsworth, 1989:310).

In this chapter I consider whose voice would be heard, their authenticity and how I would analyse and write up the students' narratives. As an insider-researcher, my status is given considerable attention. Undoubtedly, I was in a privileged position - one in which I had a considerable degree of power (Drake, 2010). Having grappled with my professional concerns for a number of years and being intrinsically part of my EdD journey, I could hardly deny that I would bring certain assumptions and hunches concerning what I might expect to find. Whilst aware that there can be no complete or definitive solution to the problem of speaking for others, I wanted to at least minimise the researcher effect.

As I have already mentioned in Chapter Five, the problem of power differentials subsumed within teacher/student pedagogical relationships are well documented by feminist writers. As Ellsworth, Gore and Orner point out, claims for empowerment may silence those wishing to speak.

Resonating with Ellsworth's disquiet concerning the difficulty of aligning oneself to the lived experiences of students is thought provoking. As a former Access student, my biography might well resonate with that of the students, but my experiences are still intrinsically located in another time and place. My personal biography would always be implicated throughout the research process and although this does not mean I am unable to interpret and analyse the experiences of others, it does require acknowledging the extent to which my interpretations could be partial. A process of self-questioning and reflexive interrogation concerning my values and politics - what could potentially be either spoken or erased - was fundamental in narrating the students' stories, rather than my own.

PRESENTING AND LOCATING THE NARRATIVE THEMES WITHIN THE THESIS STRUCTURE

The VCR method generated a great deal of data and this required significant sorting and sifting in order to develop anything resembling a coherent narrative concerning perceptions of CP. When the student transcripts had been read from a variety of standpoints, I looked for elements in the various readings of their narrative accounts. I had to think deeply about how I would position and present the different readings of the various narratives. I was particularly troubled about the weighting I would give to the different readings. Should I give more emphasis concerning listening to and/or reading for the voice of individual students, significant others or social/cultural factors and how would they be represented at the writing up stage? These were problematic issues and the work of Alcoff and Spivak were particularly insightful for thinking through key decisions made and making these known. However, there could never really be any true symmetry in terms of the weighting attached to different readings.

Knowing student narratives would probably emerge organically, I would have to think about this carefully. Hoping to ring-fence and capture equitable chunks of reading would be impossible; students would always place different emphasis on particular aspects of how they experience CP and I had to respect this. Using the VCR framework and putting reflexivity at the heart of careful reading and re-reading of the various narratives, I at least tried to make known the relationships that existed between the students and myself. Making my role more fully known within the research process - the methodological journey I had undertaken, decisions taken and choices made as a way of increasing its authenticity were important.

Confident my methodological and analytical standpoint was compatible with the professional concerns I was investigating, I was genuinely respectful of students and the stories they wanted to tell. Indeed, drawing on the feminist and postcolonial perspectives, such as Spivak, was fundamental to considering the insider-researcher conundrum.

READING AND PRESENTING STUDENT NARRATIVES - A CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION

Thinking back to Chapter Five, I was aware of the limitations and risks attached to the speech act and possible appropriation of student voices. Reflecting more deeply on who is asking the questions and who is listening and reading was indeed helpful. As bell hooks suggests, in claiming to deconstruct subjectivity whilst at the same time speak for them, the subaltern is in fact, unable to speak. Indeed, hooks (1990: 145) invites those of us who are interested, to consider where:

...‘within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of colonizing relations? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing, of making culture’.

In this sense, the standpoint one chooses to adopt is a crucial one. As hooks suggests, it can influence what is said, the way in which it is articulated and the language chosen. In this way, language becomes a place of struggle in the construction of knowledge and meaning.

Throughout this thesis I have been mindful of using language that might suggest I am representing the voices of others (whether students or other practitioners) and attempting to speak for them. For example, I have been cautious concerning the use of 'us' 'we' and 'our' because it might indicate something of a student/practitioner dichotomous position. Providing a reflexive and ethical framework, the VCR approach helped me engage with the problem of representation. Listening to the student narratives, I could never claim I could ever completely be detached from what was spoken or ensure that as the researcher, my identity and values would not be significant.

Unavoidably, they could influence how I might analyse, interpret and write up the data (Dunne, Pryor & Yates, 2005). Particularly at the data analysis stage, I reflected on who might be included or excluded through my use of language. As the insider-researcher, I had to resist the inclination to teach rather than listen to my students who might be considered less privileged than me.

In what Alcoff (1992, 1994) calls a crisis of representation, attempting to speak for, teach, remedy or even colonise may be all-pervasive. Language plays a pivotal role in the interpretation of voice and there are also concerns about the legitimisation in terms of what the researcher claims in the name of interpretation (Dunne, Pryor & Yates, 2005).

However, whilst thinking through the problems of voice-work and interpretation is helpful, it does not necessarily mean the voices of the silenced and marginalised can never be spoken. In spite of Ellsworth's concern regarding the possibility of further excluding or marginalising those who are already marginalised, the VCR framework provides a way of reflexively representing student voices in an honest and authentic way. As I said at the start of the thesis, I expressed my concern that students do not always have a voice and are not necessarily listened to, unless part of the quality assurance process.

I know my intentions were intrinsically beneficently good, invariably there are multiple perspectives on any situation and partiality might be inevitable (Drake, 2010). Acknowledging that objectivity and neutrality are rooted in the assumptions of the researcher was crucial (Burke, 2002a). Whenever I speak or write I am undoubtedly participating in the construction and reproduction of discourses. Nevertheless, I was able to utilise the VCR research framework as a way of deepening my understanding of the issues and problems students frequently experience in relation to CP. In this context, each narrative theme is a collection of individual accounts and these are presented as three distinct themes. The first VCR reading - identifying the story or plot, it draws out the contradictions, protagonists, sub-plots and recurrent imagery. Considering my responses to the students' narratives and being mindful concerning my emotional, intellectual and academic responses to what was being said guided the whole process (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998; Gilligan *et al.* 2003).

Although the four readings are central to the three narrative themes presented in the penultimate section of this thesis (in Chapter Seven) there is no straightforward relationship between the weightings attached to each reading and theme.

They were helpful in foregrounding and contextualising the way in which students speak of themselves in relation to returning to education and inter-relationships with significant others (as in narrative themes one and two). Indeed, they were useful for exploring the misperceptions, feelings of powerlessness concerning CP.

The four readings were also helpful in locating students' narratives within their cultural contexts and social structures (narrative themes two and three) and the sometimes unspoken structures from which they speak. I had to consider how the four readings would translate into narrative themes and justify this. The different themes can be thought of as interpretive frames of analysis located within the unstructured conversations. In turn, they have been distilled into three distinct narrative themes.

I have done my best to make known the challenges and complexities emerging from the unstructured conversations, although in the end, there were no neat or easy ways of doing so. Drawing on the work of Ellsworth, Luke and Gore, Burke (2002a: 40) suggests, we are often:

...‘entrenched in the historical, geographical, political, personal, economic, psychological and social dynamics of the moment’.

Undoubtedly, decisions were necessary regarding presenting and locating the narrative themes within the thesis structure. After some consultation with the students concerning my interpretation of their narratives and eventual themes used to present them, I felt I had done my best to democratise the process.

Although acknowledging that to some extent, the presentation of student narratives might inevitably reflect a particular standpoint, through the use of the VCR framework I have endeavoured to address these concerns.

As this chapter suggests, putting reflexivity at the heart of careful reading and re-reading of the various narratives, I have at least tried to make known the relationships that exist between me and the students. I also hope that by making my role known within the research process - the methodological journey I had undertaken, decisions taken and choices made - I might encourage others to engage with my research findings. I have not attempted to hide anything and hope the three narrative themes presented in the next chapter authentically represent the students' collective personal experiences concerning resistance to CP.

CHAPTER 7 - PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF STUDENT NARRATIVE THEMES

In this chapter I draw on and analyse the stories narrated by the eleven students who participated in the unstructured conversations. Although each individual narrative could be described as unique, on the basis of common themes that emerged, they are grouped into three themes:

1. Second chance journeys - high stakes and the personal investments of undertaking an Access course
2. Misperceptions, feelings of powerlessness and the misfiring of pedagogy
3. Something's going on but I don't quite know what it is!

Although the students' profiles are presented quite briefly within the three themes, slightly fuller profiles are available in Appendix One.

I really wanted to give students the opportunity to articulate their views, yet think consciously about how this was being undertaken. Reading as a way of understanding student narrative orientations produced different categories of responses and really helped me excavate pertinent segments. In turn, I worked through data, arranging segments/blocks into narrative orientations. Throughout the process I was deeply immersed in listening to, the reading and re-reading of emerging narratives and the meaning of student stories. I recorded emerging similarities and differences and overlaps across and within student narratives.

Narrative theme 1

SECOND CHANCE JOURNEYS - HIGH STAKES AND THE PERSONAL INVESTMENTS OF UNDERTAKING AN ACCESS COURSE

At the start of this thesis I referred to the ‘perceptual interface’ concerning why some students embrace CP whilst others resist. Using an aide memoire, I wanted to explore contextual issues concerning students’ motivation for undertaking the Access programme. I started the unstructured conversations by inviting students to consider previous experiences of teaching and learning and how they compared with experiences on the programme. I formed the impression that for many, gaining a place at university helped in acquiring the necessary qualifications for making a successful transition (both economic and social) in their lives. In short, gaining a qualification they could use in the world of work, rather than for any emancipatory reasons, was crucial.

A current Access student and in her late thirties, Sue had worked part-time (mostly in retail) and was a mother of three children. She saw herself as very much working class and was proud of her roots and her achievements as a single parent¹¹. She talked about the various thoughts and concerns she experienced progressing through the social work pathway. To use her words:

...‘I had many thoughts in my mind before I came on the course and I was all at sea a bit when I thought about doing Access. I knew that if I was going to change the way my life was going, I mean the way it had been...I dropped out of education. I knew I ought to be moving in a new direction and I wanted to change things from how they had always been’.

I asked her to elaborate and say more concerning what she considered ‘moving in a new direction’ actually meant. Sue admitted to being quite anxious at the time and her feelings were of concerns about things not being ‘like school’:

¹¹ I asked each student about their social backgrounds and familial situations as a way of contextualising the unstructured conversations and strand four of Mauthner and Doucet’s VCR method.

...‘I mean I had done education before but it was mostly a case of not being successful, you know the thing when you’re younger dropping out or not trying hard enough. Yeah and I worried that it might be more of the same, the school experience thing and I was really hoping and praying things had moved on from there’.

(Sue: 12 April, 2010)

These thoughts and feelings were not unusual for students as they embarked on the programme, but as mature learners (having predominantly arrived via non-traditional routes) their narratives reflected concerns about wishing to achieve social and economic transformation and the high stakes involved. Ironically, they could always make the link between CP and achieving such transformations, although there was a general consensus this was usually more pronounced at the end of the academic year. On the humanities pathway, Alyson talks about the risks involved in embarking on her journey. Her narrative was peppered with concerns about previous educational experiences and related anxieties. Married, in her mid-forties, with two children and a career in management behind her, she was passionate about pursuing a degree in theology. From a middle-class background and financially secure, she was determined to pursue what she believed was a ‘calling’ to do something ‘different’ with her life and made considerable lifestyle adjustments to do so. Yet her narrative was a self-conscious one and she was particularly concerned about being perceived as somehow deficient – to use her words, ‘thick’:

...‘I saw staff at the College and I was nervous about being seen as thick and come over really badly. Yeah, I had pre-conceptions err yeah I suppose like it could be regimented like school. I suppose I failed at school really...you know I thought it might be like at school where I was bored a lot of the time....the thing is though, the teachers here have been unbelievable...they’ve walked with me through the whole experience...I wondered what everyone made of me because at times I struggled so much...I was frightened some of the time because coming to education again has been something of a calling to do and be something different...I made sacrifices for me to do the course and failing was not an option’.

Reflecting on her time at school, Alyson talked of the fear and anxieties she experienced during this period. I wanted to get a better insight regarding her anxieties and the spectre of 'failing' and whether different pedagogical approaches had helped alleviate these feelings:

... 'I know teaching methods have been different from what I thought they would be... we were encouraged to relate academic material to our own lives... many of us were used to a more formal type of teaching and just more worried about getting through the course rather than pondering all the injustices of the world... many of us were just too pre-occupied with getting through and getting a qualification'.
(Alyson: 13 April, 2010)

Reading for the personal pronoun (I shall say more about this later) was particularly valuable in understanding individual student's motivation for returning to education and contradictions within their narratives. Their stories were often about expectations (largely self-imposed) and what many viewed as setting the record straight. They were also frequently shrouded with ambivalence and confusion concerning how they would achieve those aspirations. Indeed, students' concerns often related to personal, social, and structural contexts within which their narratives were located and the particular circumstances in which they found themselves.

Listening to these narratives it was not just a case of students not making the connection between CP and the personal transformations they wanted to make; some felt critical pedagogical practices could actually *prevent* them from achieving their ambitions. This is something I had not thought deeply about before and represented something - a thwarting of the transformations students often so desperately seek.

In her late thirties and single again, Beverley (also a mother of two children), was holding down a part-time job. There was a degree of frustration in her life as she sought to embark on her educational journey and maintain family life. From a working class family and having originally left school at age sixteen, Beverley had little previous formal education and achieving what she refers to as 'my destiny' and full potential, was important. I asked her about her experiences of teaching and learning and how the current course approximated with those experiences. Looking back at sometimes negative pedagogical relationships and experiences, she was appreciative of CP but at the same time, acknowledged the need to 'just pass' and viewed doing so as a way of exorcising the past:

... 'well my experiences in the classroom all through school were mixed and even bad and I wanted to get away from those feelings, yes kind of put them to rest... well the teaching here has been different from when I was at school and relevant and will help us move forward with our lives... yet in the first term I almost ignored a lot of teaching approaches based on CP yes almost denying I needed to have more critical skills and in a way that was denying myself the chance of gaining the skills I would require at university'.

Undoubtedly, I could understand how experiences of school might have an effect on her first few months at College, but was curious concerning the contradictory nature of what she was saying.

I asked her why she was 'denying' herself of teaching approaches that would undoubtedly help her develop the critical skills necessary for progressing through the Access programme and beyond:

... 'coming on the course was a big sacrifice but a way of changing my life and looking back I can see it was a stupid thing to do but I wanted to be a good student and prove myself worthy... by that I mean ensure I got good grades and prove the sacrifices I was making, oh and my family too, were justified. The teachers encourage us to take different theories and perspectives and make sense of them in relation to our own lives. That's okay but it has its drawbacks... one we need to get on and pass learning outcomes and get the right grades and two, any teaching method that gets us through is good enough I guess'.

Again, I probed for more detail:

...‘I mean it’s been as much about getting us to realise we are good enough and intelligent enough to get us to university...although it’s good to be able to use literature and theory to understand our own lives and some of the barriers that stand in our way, but it’s succeeding that really counts’.
(Beverley: 28 April, 2010)

Similarly, having left school early with negative pedagogical experiences and having recently been made redundant, Amelia joined the current programme (business and law pathway) and was passionate about pursuing a new start and, to use her words, ‘turn things around’. In her early thirties and recently married she was aware of her own sense of presence within her group and how it might affect some her fellow students:

...‘to be honest school life was not great and my first experience of a college was not much better... you know how it is, my lack of qualifications would only take me so far...I mean I wanted a second bite of the cherry and Access has given me the opportunity for turning things around in my life. The teachers here do encourage us to apply what they teach, I mean the theories etc., and relate them to our own stories...I mean err...[pause] to how things have been for us and was something I had not always done, but it has its drawbacks (laugh)’.

I enquired about what these ‘drawbacks’ were and how she felt about them:

...‘I am quite a driven person as you know (laugh) and like to know where I am going and like a lot people here, I was pretty focused on the need to get the right grades. Of course CP is good for becoming self-aware and being able to see yourself almost in the theories you’re discussing and subjects such as economics and psychology help you do that, but I did not quite get that at the start of the year’.

Amelia was quite animated at this point and speaking retrospectively, was disappointed she had ‘not quite’ understood practitioners’ critical ‘intentions’. I wanted to ascertain whether it was a case of my critical approaches being simply different from what she had experienced before, or whether other factors were involved:

...‘yes I didn’t get it really and I can see where you were coming from now but it was less clear when we first started. You know there is a lot we all had to contend with...I mean with many students having busy family lives (laugh) sometimes tension with partners and things and trying to keep focused on passing assignments and exams...I wonder if teachers’ good intentions sometimes get crowded out sometimes by our anxieties’.
(Amelia: 5 May, 2010)

As I listened to the various narratives, I felt they were very often worried about overcoming past failure and making sure things were going to be different this time. Given many Access programmes run over one academic year I was not surprised to hear pedagogues’ critical intentions sometimes get ‘crowded out’. With so much ground to be covered in one academic year, student anxieties concerning pressure to achieve become overwhelming for some.

Although sometimes resistant to CP, Becky and Sean also believed their lack of qualifications held them back and viewed the programme as a way of changing things for the better. In her early twenties, a single-parent and from an Afro-Caribbean background, Becky had grown up in a single-parent family. She was also conscious of following in her mother’s footsteps and getting onto a nursing degree programme at a ‘good’ university. Very much her own person and sure of her chosen direction, she demonstrated some vulnerability concerning pedagogical tasks I expected students to undertake:

...‘I don’t care too much about the way the teachers deliver their teaching ‘cos it’s just a case of getting on with it, I just need to get the best grade I can if I want to do a nursing course at a good uni... I know some uni’s are better than others and that will affect my future. Teachers can make a big difference and I know the lecturers here may want to do what you call critical teaching methods and group activities peer work and reflective discussions etc...[pause] are good, but telling us what we need to know as a way of making sure we have what we need is also all important to most of us, don’t you think so?’

Whilst not disagreeing with the sentiment of students 'getting on' and achieving their full potential, I asked her whether it really was that clear-cut. What followed was a series of contradictions in which unfamiliar or even 'wacky' teaching practices, albeit reluctantly, were talked of positively:

...'I think the tutors here have really helped me get a place at a good uni.... yeah some of the creative teaching practices have helped me think more deeply about the subject material and I would say I am more analytical than I was before. The teaching has been more strange, well different from what I have experienced in school or on previous college courses, sometimes they seemed a bit wacky (long pause and laugh)...but you can still be pleased that you've done a good job in getting us to make a positive change in our lives'.

(Becky 7 May, 2010)

Although disappointed concerning students' instrumentalism, nevertheless, I try to encourage them to look more closely at taken-for-granted knowledge concerning their lived realities.

Sean, a middle aged working class student who had successfully run his own business whilst believing he never had any academic potential, is typical of this type of student. Wanting to study ancient history at university and having fallen on difficult times, he wanted to change direction and was concerned about doing the 'right thing':

...'I've never really been academically minded until now and can you believe it I'm almost forty or so years out of school and after all the things that happened I find myself here...I mean I can't say I'm academically minded but decided to take a big decision and take the plunge. As a kid I went to a grammar school and as we learnt in sociology, well... mmm (long pause and hesitation) well although I am from what you would call a working class background, but I guess I had a reasonable start to my education...but I found the teaching kind of old fashioned, well even boring'.

Like other students, Sean's narrative is also interspersed with words and phrases about not being academically minded and he was quite relaxed about this. Yet at the same time, I was in no doubt that achieving academically and getting the 'right grades' were extremely important to him. He repeatedly says he has never been 'academically minded' and is quite resistant to undertaking the sort of learning activities that reflect CP. Nevertheless, he views being more critical and academic as evidence of 'going somewhere':

...I do like the way teachers teach here and the lectures are good but I have sometimes been resistant to the CP thing...I mean being my age I am familiar with more formal ways of teaching and always felt I was bright enough to twig what was going on in class...I mean I want to think more critically and be more academic because that means you're going somewhere and I think the more qualifications you have the better chances you have of getting a better job and a better life...you know, I may not be so academic but know that the more education you have, the better it is...people take more notice of you and you get more respect..I have blown things a number of times, yes but ah well now I feel I'm getting my life together again'.

(Sean: 9 May, 2010)

As already mentioned, my sample group consisted of current and previous students and having looked at the narratives of the former, I will now turn to unstructured conversations with the latter. In a position to look back on their time on the programme I believed they could shed additional light on the extent to which CP may (or may not) have helped them in making the transition to HE.

From an Afro-Caribbean background, in his late thirties and completing his first year at university, Denis already possessed some basic academic qualifications. Coming from a privileged background, he also admitted to having had a rather 'chequered educational experience'. The Access to psychology pathway was the culmination of what he viewed as a way back into full-time education.

He was also painfully aware of being a mature student and wanted to pursue his ambition of studying for a degree in criminology. Happy to reflect on his personal journey, he talked about what was initially a 'fragile' start on the programme and a challenging first year at university:

...‘It was the end of the first part of a journey to get myself together and do something more serious with my life...well err...suddenly after years of not achieving educationally, I was at uni and writing essays and doing exams. Being at uni is different and really very different from Access, I mean tutors did explain the teaching might be different and I was kind of fragile about that, just like I was at the start of the Access course’.

I asked him to tell me something about how 'different' the teaching is:

...‘you even mention critical pedagogy (laugh) which is something I had almost forgotten about...(laugh again) but the sort of teaching activities you describe are not very much in evidence...you could say it was patchy and most of the time it’s just lectures and seminars which are mostly teacher led... I mean lecturers and professors have all the power and it is our job to take notes and listen...in the first year I was, well it was hard and I sometimes felt anxious, even different or out of place in the first year’.

I listened to Denis's reflections concerning the teaching and learning he encountered. As he moved from emphasising the 'I' to the collective 'our', he talks about the power he believes HE practitioners possess and associated anxieties with being 'in a different place' at university. These concerns resonate with what other students had already said and I asked whether he felt the Access programme had prepared him for this:

...‘then again I do realise what we did on the Access course helped us understand our situation, I mean our journey...in my case it did prepare me for being more comfortable at uni. I mean for example being critical of the status quo in education and in other fields has helped me see where I am as a former Access student, I mean, my position in the whole thing’.
(Denis: 2 June, 2010)

It was heartening to hear that he felt undertaking the Access journey had left him better able to interpret and understand his situation – an ontological re-positioning.

Also a first year university student, Michael talks of the same kind of loneliness former Access students have experienced. Single, in his mid-twenties and from a working class background, he had not performed well at school. Working part-time as a retail manager and something of a disappointment to his parents and currently studying for a degree in history, he was determined to make a 'success of things':

... 'Yes there is a difference between the Access course a big one really...at the start I felt a bit strange because many students were very young and I could not see many people around like me...yeah as I said the teaching err...I mean lectures, are okay, but you're largely on your own... (long pause), so the CP thing, well it might feature in some seminars but not a lot'.

At this point Michael became quite rueful concerning his past educational experience and as he puts it being 'on your own':

... 'I did feel a bit outside even strange at the start of the year and feeling kind of on my own...I remember back to some of the Access modules, how we were asked to question theory and get involved through peer work as a way of understanding our lives...it did help, I mean, in knowing your own situation as in turning up at uni at the time I did and not feeling guilty about my lack of achievements in the past... that can be comforting to know you're not some kind of freak'.

I invited him to expand on his thoughts and feelings:

... 'I mean most of my friends went to uni in the conventional way and I should've done too...now I am playing a kind of catch up holding down my job and still trying to have a social life. CP mmm yes it was a good way of doing things in the classroom and even though many of us didn't get it and some still don't (laugh), there has been a positive spin off by the end of Access and for those at uni...our writing is probably better than it would have been...more reflective I mean and I want to make a success of things and 'cos grades are going well, I am proud and my parents are too...I feel more relaxed with friends who have been to uni too because I guess I am becoming a bit like them...being more academic and writing better is all part of that really'.

(Michael: 4 June, 2010)

Like Denis and Michael, Donna also experienced the Access course as pedagogically different from previous educational experiences. Living on a large ex-council estate, Donna was now in her second year at university studying psychology.

A young single-mother in her late twenties her educational experience was rather fragmented. As a non-traditional student, she appreciated how 'getting critical' at an early stage could help in better 'knowing' oneself and provide something of a bulwark against the 'aloneness'¹² students have already acknowledged:

... 'well I did not always enjoy the teaching activities, but came to value how democratic classes were...uni can be a lonely place and you have to think for yourself and be independent...I mean you have to be able to be critical in classroom debates as well as the writing up of essays...I'm less resistant to reflective activities because I have done it before and that's an advantage. The problem is it takes being at uni a year or two to find that out (laugh) and that's a shame'.

I sensed Donna was rather regretful about this and asked her to elaborate on the advantages of becoming more 'reflective':

... 'I know you tried but you really should try and find a way to make students understand what CP actually is at the start of the course and make it known more explicitly...students will need it later and may just not know it then, but I am not sure how you would do that...I guess you're now preaching to the converted really you are...I have been critical all the way through the different modules...It's been tough these past few years and although I know people respect me for sticking to staying on the course it's been so tough just trying to balance work, family and studies and managing some of my feelings of guilt'.

She goes on to say:

... 'but being able to put the tough times into perspective and realising the stress and guilt were often the stock in trade for students like me, well that helped. Being able to discuss things with other people, I mean other students as well as family and colleagues and write about them in a critical way as in applying it to yourself...your own experiences and circumstances can also deepen your understanding of things and that is an empowering thing'.

(Donna: 10 June, 2010)

Yvonne and Rebecca (formerly on the social work and nursing pathways) were third year students and close to gaining their degrees. Both were balancing studies with familial responsibilities and part-time employment.

¹² I am not always comfortable with the term but it does act as a marker.

From a professional middle class background and having previously dropped out of college, Yvonne reflected back on her experiences. She talks about CP as a crucial factor in managing the ‘ups and downs’ of academic life and how awareness of ‘self’ in relation to subject material can help in better understanding one’s position and circumstances:

...‘I did like being at College but was almost dreading what my experience might be like at uni and sure enough it wasn’t like things are here; you were not given that much help and although you were not patronised and your experiences were valued, it was not like a two-way thing...I mean being critical in the way you approach studying helps you be more self-aware, not only in the subjects you teach but in knowing yourself in relation to your experiences. In the course of my journey I had a better understanding of why I was at uni and more so than I might have had before...it’s knowing your own history if you like and that helps makes you more secure in yourself’.
(Yvonne 25 June, 2010)

Like other Access students, Rebecca’s experiences of school had also been troubled and this was of concern. From a ‘comfortable background’ [her words] and with a husband who was ‘well educated’, she wanted to become a professional social worker:

...‘Looking back I can see I was a bit naïve when I started the course wanting to make a success of my studies...I was perhaps even resistant to a type of teaching on Access because it was very different from what I had previously experienced...it has also been good as a way of understanding your own journey’.

I pressed a little harder for detail concerning what her ‘journey’ had involved and how she felt about it:

...‘the way things have happened, the way they have turned out [laugh] and difficult times along the way. I mean I often had a feeling I should be somewhere else I mean, like being with my children or being at work...studying and getting under the skin of things helps you make sense of those experiences, it’s just a shame I did not see all that then when I first started, but then again I can’t see how you can fully appreciate CP until you have gone through the teaching that’s involved with it...umm yes well that’s a challenge for you and the other teachers’.
(Rebecca 6 July, 2010)

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Listening to the students' stories, I thought deeply about what I was hearing and how I was feeling. They tended to place a great deal of emphasis on the 'I' in the sense they had not been particularly successful in their school life or careers and often lacked the educational credentials to make a change. Having been a former Access student myself, I could certainly empathise with them and felt strongly that as practitioners, my goal should be to support students in developing the requisite skills for HE and beyond and empower them to pursue their ambitions.

Tracing the personal pronoun, I listened closely to how the students spoke about themselves and their lives. My intention was to uncover narrative interpretations I may have failed to notice had I not paid close attention to the way students spoke about themselves. For example, there was often a recurring discrepancy between the 'I', that is, when students categorically stated they had never been 'much good at school' (often with sense of regret) yet succeeding academically was so important to them. Students often began their narratives with the words such as: 'I failed', and 'I dropped out'. Many students said it two or three more times, followed by recurring words such as 'I did not like', 'I dropped out, 'I was bored' or 'I gave up'.

Having some understanding of the social and cultural contexts from which they were speaking, I was aware of viewing them as in some way deficient or in need of empowering and the extent to which some voices might be privileged over others. Acknowledging possible preconceptions or prejudices I might have had at least helped maintain some impartiality.

Reading for the personal pronoun was valuable in understanding students' motivation for returning to learning and the inner contradictions within their narratives. Paying close attention to the way they spoke about themselves and tracing the personal pronoun within individual transcripts also provided interpretations I might otherwise have missed. The constant contradictions that emerged around the use of 'I' for example were noticeable. Indeed, discrepancies between the 'I' who emphatically states he or she has never been 'much good at school' for example (and the sense of regret that often went with it - again!) were often followed by an admission that critical teaching approaches were helpful.

Although students' concerns related to personal, social, and structural contexts within which their narratives were located and often characterised by lack of achievement, at the same time they were about the particular circumstances in which they found themselves. They expressed real concerns regarding the imposition of CP in relation to possible social and economic transformation - in short, the latter tended to overwhelm the former. Moreover, their main concern was often about getting things right and being a good student as a way of making progress.

This was evident in Sean's back-to-back contradiction where he states one feeling and then immediately another which is at odds with the first. For example, initially he found critical teaching practices (such as experiential learning and peer review) quite challenging. He repeatedly says (over four times in fact) that 'I've never been academically minded' and wanted to think and write more critically - be more academic because it meant 'you're going somewhere'. Yet in the next sentence he talks about being 'resistant' to CP.

How the students spoke about interpersonal (including familial relationships and those with significant others) and broader social networks was also important. I listened to students describing their relationships (these occurred across gender, ethnicity and class) and how these informed their beliefs and understanding. This was particularly valuable in revealing how students felt concerning what they saw as their lack of power in relation to practitioners (academics in HE) and the need for recognition and respect.

There were relationships students regarded as positive in their lives. These include ones in which they felt staff treated them respectfully, the degree to which they could confide, or the extent to which they felt they were being heard. Tracing these relationships was interesting in getting a feel for the ones they thought of as more constraining or the extent to which they felt silenced or rejected. Several themes emerged from the various readings of transcripts including that of 'aloneness', otherness and a need for 'respect'. Indeed, gaining the right academic credentials was crucial to gaining respect from family members or social networks in which they resided.

On re-reading the unstructured conversations, students' concerns with making a success of themselves resonated strongly with literature that envisages them as pursuing a 'second chance' or 'setting the record straight' (Parry,1996). Achieving good grades and 'making it' was often about gaining one's self-respect and the respect of significant others, including family and friends. Yet, as they began their new educational journeys, aloneness and isolation were also part of these experiences.

Indeed, they resonate strongly with discursive accounts of Access students being non-traditional by virtue of not having progressed to HE via more traditional routes (Williams, 1997; Thomas, 2001; Burke, 2004). Such discourses can produce an otherness where Access - and other non-traditional students - might be viewed as equal but different (Williams in Burke, 2004). They repeatedly verbalised apprehension about lacking power and recognising their position in HE and I shall develop this point in the next narrative theme (pages 114 - 130). Moving from more empowering pedagogical approaches to less benign ones at university can be traumatic. Nevertheless, the idea of gaining more qualifications and respectability was central to student narratives. Orientations towards perceived respectability resonates strongly with the work of Skeggs (1994, 1995, 2002, 2004) who highlights its importance as a key mechanism by which some groups are othered.

Listening for and being aware of students' position in relation to wider structural cultural and social forces was helpful in contextualising their narratives. Although not exclusively, many of the students tend to come from working-class backgrounds and believed the Access programme could help them move their lives forward¹³. Focusing on how students experience the social context from within which they were speaking helped me locate their concerns within broader structural contexts.

¹³ I could never be absolutely certain of students' social class backgrounds - to some degree my knowledge would always be incomplete.

I wanted to know more about how students actually understood or acknowledged social, political, cultural and structural factors in relation to the assumptions they make concerning returning to education and perceptions of CP. What struck me was the way student narratives routinely attributed perceptions of past failures to personal shortcomings rather than looking at structural and ideological explanations - forces quite often beyond their control. I looked for ways in which they understood dominant and normative conceptions of what it might mean to be a student and how these are made known.

Their transcripts often read something like a moral lexicon containing words such as: 'should', 'ought', 'could', 'right', 'wrong' and so on. These words allude to places in the narratives where they were speaking through society's prevailing cultural norms and values. This was frequently about getting an education and/or making something of yourself. These moral voices often conflicted with students' day-to-day familial responsibilities and/or work commitments. At the same time, however, they talk about CP helping in questioning these voices. I do feel that as students looked back (particularly those now in HE) it has been invaluable in managing the challenges of returning to education. Unfortunately, these same moral voices often overwhelmed the questioning voices that current Access students are still trying to develop.

Given neo-liberal discourses that emphasise the acquisition of qualifications and skills for work, it is only natural that students concern themselves with gaining good qualifications. It is hardly surprising that the moral voice is predominant in students' narratives and one cannot be critical of them for wanting the 'right' academic credentials.

In turn, critical pedagogues may need to exercise more caution concerning interventions aimed at personal and collective empowerment; they could be viewed as outdated in today's mass education system (Morley, 2002a). I would argue that CP is needed more than ever and literature in the field should recognise more explicitly the importance of how achievement shapes students' pedagogical experiences. Undoubtedly, deeper connections need to be made between critical practice and its potential value for contextualising the situations and range of emotions that students talked of. Greater understanding of structural and ideological forces that shape students' educational biographies may also go some way to reassuring students progressing through the Access programme and beyond; providing a bulwark against those undermining moral voices to which I have referred.

Although students' narratives were sprinkled with stories of past failure and go towards explaining their struggles with the various moral voices and might also aid in explaining their resistance to CP, I was not convinced this was the whole story. Whilst helpful in making known the structural and ideological forces that shape students' ontologies concerning moral imperatives and contradictions that inform their narratives and contextualise experiences, they remain largely abstract conceptions. Although accepting that making things more explicit was essential, I still had to find out more about why critical modes of address either misfire or fail to connect. If critical pedagogues are to achieve this, discovering more about the perceptual interface (how practitioner perception might be at variance with that of students) would be crucial in overcoming possible misconceptions. The next set of narratives emerging from the unstructured conversations reflects these concerns.

Narrative theme 2

MISPERCEPTIONS, FEELINGS OF POWERLESSNESS AND THE MISFIRING OF PEDAGOGY

To understand more fully the paradoxical nature of critical practice and dissonance between pedagogical approaches I value, and those seemingly valued by students, frequent re-readings of the narratives were crucial throughout this study. However, whilst helpful in getting a better understanding of ambivalence and resistance to CP, somehow they still felt incomplete. Indeed, variances in perception and the misfiring/failure of critical intentions sometimes reflected anxieties concerning power relations, although not necessarily the ones practitioners frequently invited students to critique, but those located in the classroom itself.

Given my commitment to critical literature already cited and my antipathy towards quick pedagogical fixes, I knew reading for and listening to students' views might be challenging. As I read and re-read the student narratives, I realised that feelings of disappointment or irritation were inevitable. However, whilst aware of the genuine frustrations students might feel, I was conscious of expressing more sympathy for some and less for others. I was more sympathetic to Sean for example, because his life was characterised by frustration and failure, whereas Amelia and Michael were just starting out on their educational journeys. In this sense I felt that older students might in some way be more deserving of a second chance than others.

Whilst student expectations and interpretations are related to the personal, social, and structural contexts in which their educational biographies are located, their perceptions tended to be informed by day-to-day experiences and personal circumstances. Listening to their stories, it appeared they not only wanted to be told what they needed to know; they often wanted to be taught what they needed to know – I felt it was about getting the right grades. Students were often concerned with covering material (learning outcomes and grading criteria) in a given time and phrases such as: ‘I need to just know’, ‘be told what to do’, ‘I just need to meet the criteria’ or ‘get the grade’ symbolised these anxieties¹⁴.

For example, when I discussed more creative pedagogical activities undertaken as part of a history session, students sometimes expressed unease concerning their worth. Sue for example, stated in no uncertain terms how she felt [on this occasion it was about getting into role as a Suffragette] and her apprehension epitomised these kinds of anxieties. In addition to feeling anxious about covering the material and meeting grading criteria, there was also some sensitivity related to how others would view her undertaking a role play activity.

Sue:

...‘It’s all very well doing creative stuff and marching round the College but like group discussions and getting into character for the history debate...I am interested in early feminists, but at times was anxious...I just thought, yes well I just need to know what I need to know..umm yes to get the grade if you see what I mean and I wanted things to be less complicated and more straightforward’.

¹⁴ The word ‘cover’ is frequently mentioned, as in cover the essential ground.

I asked her what she meant by ‘less complicated’ and ‘straightforward’ and for a little more detail concerning her obvious anxieties about getting the ‘grade’:

...‘I mean I enjoyed doing it and as long as I was going to get the right grade I was okay with that although I know other people thought it would be better just to work off our hand outs and reading packs in the library’.

A degree of ambivalence surfaces in this extract in which Sue is quite uncertain concerning the value of these teaching and learning approaches. It felt to me as if role playing and other critical approaches would be acceptable on the proviso that getting the right credentials was assured:

...‘In the end I enjoyed some of the role play stuff we do but just being told the sorts of things we need to cover in our writing, I mean the learning aims and grade criteria, is in some ways more straightforward’.

Explaining the possible benefits of getting into character, I suggested the tutor concerned was aware of the learning aims and grading criteria. Nevertheless, her tone is quite steadfast concerning the need to be a ‘good student’ and successful:

...‘I was losing my way and wondered well what my family and friends would think about what we were doing here and whether it was simply a distraction from doing the essay [laugh] I mean covering the material and getting the grade...anyway, isn’t getting into character for kids I thought, well maybe this is not exactly being very academic and what a good student should be doing...I mean given, well given we have so much to do, I mean academic work to do now, things would be just as easy I mean easier if I had just been asked to do an essay...that way I would have been more likely to get a better grade and be a good student which is something I wanted to be, more straightforward in fact. Yes, I know my academic skills were not that good back in October and November time, but they got better and I know people like family and friends are surprised and proud of what I have achieved’.

(Sue 12 April, 2010)

Now at university and looking back on the first and second terms of the Access programme, Michael had been equally anxious concerning whether he was 'on track' concerning learning outcomes and admitted to questioning the 'depth' students needed to go into when exploring historical characters:

...‘I mean in some classes we did a lot of work together, in groups I mean, and not everyone was comfortable with that...it was like a quick fix thing for me sometimes, well you know, we know what we have to do and how to get the right grades and sometimes it felt like it was just easier to do what is expected from you essay wise, I mean just cover the material, what the teachers teach you and in your writing and making sure you cover grading criteria and learning outcomes’.

In this extract Michael's words concur with Sue's depth of feeling concerning the usefulness of critical approaches in which keeping 'on track' were of paramount importance. Undoubtedly, utilitarian concerns regarding the personal investments of undertaking these learning activities (a question I asked at the start of the thesis) was fundamental and recurs time after time:

...‘In the end we needed to keep on track and some of the time it can feel like we're going off track and needed to cover things in more depth. Working with other students and sharing experiences and role play etc., well it was beneficial for us in getting under the skin of a particular character and in bringing the subject to life as in role playing a suffragette or acting out an ethics issue but I think we were a bit anxious about passing the module and getting on with focusing on that’.
(Michael 4 June, 2010)

With a strong emphasis on the 'I' (as in not wanting to engage or preferring an easier option), students sometimes switched to 'we' when expressing dissatisfaction with learners who are in some way disruptive or resistant. Indeed, Sean's and Amelia's narratives also exemplify these concerns and their narratives were marked out by phrases such as 'would not', 'lazy', 'not prepared', or 'understanding' (as in lack of) throughout.

Amelia:

...‘Looking back I remember some students wanting to give things a go and trying to get into the spirit of things but some were either too lazy or not prepared to do. I mean some of the role playing and experiential learning activities we did in the business and law module relating to the budget and government spending. But you know it was just too much for some people and they would not do it and were even sort of rebellious sometimes’.

I wanted to know more about the nature of Amelia’s frustrations regarding perceived lack of understanding concerning the sharing of ‘experiences’ and ‘rebellious’ behaviour. At this point in the conversation Amelia became quite animated and there is more than a hint of dissatisfaction with her peers:

...‘It was a bit like children throwing their toys out of the trolley and I sometimes felt some people did just not have an understanding about why teachers wanted students to share experiences and get into role play etc. Well we often got fed up with people who did not want to or were not prepared to toe the line...I know in a lot of subjects teachers try and get us to reflect more and be more critical in relation to learning materials and our own lives...you know sometimes it was never gonna work with some students... some are lazy and prefer what they see as an easy option’.
(Amelia 5 May, 2010)

Talking about ambivalence and resistance to CP, Sean, Michael and Amelia use the ‘I’ in relation to covering the material, yet on other occasions, switch to the collective ‘us’ or ‘we’. I wondered whether using the collective noun might reflect guilt concerning this; an inner contradiction as in not wanting to admit or take responsibilities for one’s own voice. Whilst acknowledging the instrumentalism already mentioned, Sean suggests the problem might lay with critical pedagogues themselves; their intentions and the way students perceive them:

...‘You know the teachers here are good and some lecture more than others. The thing is that I did not always understand what some teachers were doing I mean we did not always understand what their intentions were and that is kind of tough. Yeah I know I wanted to be engaged but another part of me was saying I just need to meet the learning outcomes and aim for a good grade. It’s not that clear-cut how CP can help us cover the learning we need to do and get better grades, well not at the start of the course’.

Given the time Access students are on the programme and the diversity of learning identities, ambivalence and uncertainty concerning CP was not unexpected. Nevertheless, I wanted to discover more about this and encouraged Sean to say more:

...‘I mean some people get easily confused I think and don’t know the value of teaching that encourages thinking critically and I now realise we need that more at uni...It’s kind of laughable but some of us wondered if some students don’t always understand CP approaches at all in that there were some misunderstandings as to whether it was intentional or simply a quick fix...I mean even the teacher being lazy (laugh and large pause)’.

As already suggested in narrative theme one, there is nothing surprising in students wanting pedagogy that is unambiguous and straightforward. Nevertheless, Sean recalled the difficulties practitioners often face when managing a diverse group of learners. Furthermore, his narrative is punctuated with pauses and laughs as he recollects students’ anxieties about being told what they needed to know:

...‘Yeah well supporting us in becoming critical can be a good thing and helps us to really engage with theories and text, but can also be difficult because as a student group we are all so diverse; people just come to the course with their (pause and laugh) own mind sets, it’s a personal thing and I am sure on occasions people would rather just be told (laugh again) what to think or write about as it’s what they’re here for, I mean to get us grades and pass the course’.
(Sean 9 May, 2010)

Students’ narratives characterised valuing ‘official’ knowledge that would ensure success rather than personal or social transformation. However, as the following extracts suggest, I can hardly blame students when newly arrived grading and pressure from universities means they need to achieve certain benchmarks. Having already talked about the value of being critical in relation to ‘knowing yourself’ (see narrative theme one), both Yvonne and Rebecca deliberated a great deal about how striving to be good students (as in getting good grades) could frustrate their academic progress.

Yvonne talked about the difficulties experienced at the start of the programme, preventing her from developing the necessary academic skills.

Yvonne:

...‘I did understand what the teachers were doing and enjoyed group work and experiential learning as a way of getting discussions going that involved our own experiences and relation to our own lives...I mean in education or social policy for example, it was also good to try and use theory to rethink power relations...it was really powerful in fact...but I know some of us just wanted teacher type lectures sometimes just giving us the knowledge we needed. I mean sometimes students saw CP as a bit ineffective and not really straightforward in getting them to where they wanted to go’.

Now feeling a little ‘guilty’ and clearly appreciating the value of transformative over traditional pedagogical approaches, retrospectively she recognises that getting the right grades was often fundamental and relational to being a good student:

...‘Looking back I know some of us feel guilty about that because it’s more clear now I mean the value of what we were doing then...it seems like I might have been limiting my own potential err...what I am trying to say, well it’s almost like frustrating your own learning needs for the sake of a short term investment. But you know I have spoken to Access students recently and I know that unis are often wanting specific grades now I mean some ask for say 30 credits at a merit or a distinction so it must be even worse for you guys now (laugh)’.

She goes on to say:

...‘The way I see things now is that your students may be even pushier for grades and that might frustrate developing the sort of critical skills that are useful at uni and beyond. As I said earlier, social work is all about being reflective and critical so in some ways something might get lost if grades become more important’.

(Yvonne 25 June, 2010)

As already mentioned, some students felt rather than being empowering, CP was something of a quick fix and critical pedagogues re-configured to that of lazy or even poor teachers. Simultaneously, practitioners adopting traditional approaches are viewed as ‘better teachers’.

Rebecca sums up these sentiments quite well:

...‘Sometimes I think if I hadn't been so difficult at the start I would have developed better academic skills and faster. What I did was to deny the skills I needed right there and then...I was harming myself by trying to shut that off...looking back I can see that teachers using more traditional approaches were sometimes seen as better teachers than the more creative and experimental ones following practices you refer to (based on CP) in the sense, well in the sense of giving students what they thought they needed’.

Frequent use of phrases such as getting the ‘right grade’ and preferences for certain knowledge or grades are testimony to the anxieties and concerns students feel. Moreover, I could see why they might prefer instrumental over more critical approaches, but was disheartened this might be viewed as symptomatic of lack of industriousness or poor teaching:

...‘It’s kind of funny, yes strange really because they were even seen as better teachers and I think that’s because some students prefer the easy option...mmm yeah well certainly at the start of the course and it’s not until you get to the end of the course that you realise the real value of the teaching approaches you endorse’.
(Rebecca 25 June, 2010)

Continually reflecting on the student narratives, I had the feeling that there was something of a sea change occurring concerning the re-configuring of identity. It was not simply the role of critical pedagogues being re-configured; the same could be said of students too. Students talking about being given what they needed may reflect a ‘pass to go’ mentality in which the necessity for achieving the right grades is paramount. In this way, students are also re-configured into that of clients and pedagogically speaking, relationships are indeed changed. Understanding students’ relationships to significant others (including: family, other students and pedagogues) and how they spoke of them was important. They could be read at different levels and required careful excavation. Reading the narratives for inner contradictions and deeper relationships was also valuable in re-evaluating literature concerning CP.

Students talked about relationships as being sometimes difficult and constraining and they positioned themselves in relation to those tensions and difficulties. As mentioned in narrative theme one, putting aside tensions related to the demands of family life the unstructured conversations yielded little concerning CP and familial relationships.

Some were self-conscious concerning pedagogy based on critical approaches and sometimes viewed as too confessional - as in Sue's account. Students were naturally sensitive concerning exposing themselves to others and concerned with their unwillingness to participate. Their narratives reveal the sometimes contradictory nature and multi-layered positions adopted within complex and contextual circumstances that were both fluid and interchangeable. Denis's comment was quite typical of these concerns:

...‘I get on well with other students but am not sure they like me when I am in group work and things...I mean when I am in a peer learning group or am sharing my experiences of a subject or being critical of a theory...I mean, like the other students, I have wondered do others in the group think my views are a bit off beam or my stories not worth listening to’.

He was quite emphatic concerning feelings of vulnerability and the sensitivity felt regarding his experiences, or whether he would be condemned or censured:

...‘I also sometimes get the same feeling with teachers too [laugh] especially when they don't agree with my point of view or think it challenges theirs...you know, sometimes in classroom discussions I only want to express a point of view, but others are only too keen, yes I'm gonna say it, kind of condemn or find fault with my experiences...it's just that being invited to criticise a theory is one thing, but if it doesn't fit in with yours then what do you do?’
(Denis 2 June, 2010)

These narratives suggest student learning identities are often fragile and underscored with anxieties and apprehension.

This was particularly the case concerning micro-relationships and behaviours they experienced whilst undertaking critical activities. They also point to some of the more oppressive and undermining behaviours that occur from time-to-time within the classroom. Beverley talks quite profoundly about how critical approaches can make the classroom environment less than comfortable:

...‘Following the kind of teaching approaches you believe in is okay but the classroom is not always an easy place to be in’.

What Beverley says is important because she raises the fallacy in assuming the classroom may be a democratic and benign environment when it may not be. Indeed, Beverley became quite angry when she spoke of the difficulties of sharing experiences:

...‘For sure you have to learn to keep your mouth shut sometimes because not all students treat learning seriously...there’s been times when class members continually don’t take sharing experiences through reflection that seriously and I’ve been thinking the teachers talk about democratic approaches to teaching and that’s great...okay...mmm...well it helps one think more deeply about social problems, but it also sometimes felt like they, I mean other students have no intention of going there and might even undermine the sort of reflective work we’re doing in class. I mean we all have our own experiences and stories and they should be taken seriously by all...I mean they should be valued by other students as well as teachers’.

(Beverley 28 April, 2010)

When critical intentions are juxtaposed against complex fragile learner identities and the kinds of instrumentalism already mentioned, it is perhaps unsurprising that ‘unsympathetic’ and sometimes undervaluing of lived experiences occurs. Alyson has strong views about this:

...‘Some students just don’t want to do CP and that means they can be unsympathetic and lacking in empathy... we all have our own lives our own stories and you know it sometimes takes courage to say things...because in some situations for example, when discussing your personal faith, they are quite personal, there have been times during the course when I have lacked confidence if you know what I mean, it’s just a people thing’.

She also talks of the assumptions practitioners sometimes make concerning the knowledge and experience of students (I discuss this in considerable depth in narrative theme three) and how, on the day, ‘people in the class’ and the ‘teacher’ can influence ‘the way things go’:

...‘I mean people in the class that day, in your group etc. etc. they make a big difference to how things go and the teacher is key a lot of the time...lots of things make a difference, the subject, who’s in charge... teachers can really be important to the way things go and whether people embrace the style of teaching you talk about...sometimes you might find it strange but sometimes I mean, although we don’t know academic stuff it doesn’t mean we are totally uninformed or that our stories are just based on our own prejudices’.

(Alyson 13 April, 2010)

Becky and Amelia also talk about the effect of some students’ behaviour during individual presentations. Interestingly, they switch here between ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘they’ moving between speaking for themselves and other students in terms of their anxieties and concerns. In a similar way to Beverley and Alyson’s accounts, although personal, they suggest that on a number of occasions several students, who whilst participating in critical activities saw them as less than important.

Becky:

...‘The activities organised in class do reflect a democratic type ethos and I liked it...I found some things better than others but the discussions and peer review stuff, well it was kind of experimental...whether it worked depended a lot of the time on who we ended up with, whether they were serious enough because some people were not very hard-working...of course people did disrupt things, you know the normal stuff and teachers were mostly helpful, although it was teachers that were in control most of the time and with their power things could be filtered out and what was listened to or got truly acknowledged was largely in their hands’.

Reading for relationships was valuable in understanding tensions within student narratives and rather surprisingly, among practitioners too.

I re-listened to students' stories many times and was surprised some students felt pedagogical decisions were imposed rather than negotiated: to use their words, what was 'filtered 'out', 'listened to' or 'truly acknowledged'. She elaborates further:

...‘Some of the time that could be frustrating because we all have different lives and experiences and although some of our stories might seem a bit bizarre, nevertheless they are important to the person who tells it...teaching practices can be empowering and engaging with theory more deeply can help you de-mystify your social world and that’s really inspiring, well, umm, it’s just that we all knew that not all students see it that way and aren’t always serious at all and I think that’s a real shame’.

(Becky 7 March, 2008)

Believing I was more democratic than their narratives suggested, I was taken aback by their strength of feelings. As Sean pointed out, pedagogical relationships were sometimes ones in which teachers were 'making all the decisions':

...‘Teachers try to be democratic about what goes on in the classroom and they try to make sure everyone has the chance to participate and make a contribution....and in all ways the teachers do their best to handle things sensitively and make sure students respect each other... but in the end they are the ones in the driving seat and making the decisions’.

(9 May 2010)

Even if it was not what I expected to hear, tracing their words was helpful in drawing attention to perceived powerlessness. Oppressive behaviours undermining CP did not surprise me because I had observed discord during critical encounters before. What did surprise me, however, was their sheer fluidity and persistence: this was qualitatively different and troubled me.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

I also wondered whether the misperceptions students speak of could have been shaped by dominant structural and ideological forces acting upon them. Indeed, although not necessarily conscious of them, they might be ones through which they speak. I could not help thinking these forces might re-orientate students' understandings of teaching and learning; one in which the transfer of official knowledge is increasingly favoured over critical approaches. Given these concerns it is understandable students routinely misperceive or reject the experimental pedagogy favoured by the critical movement. What was emerging through the students' narratives was indeed a story of misperception. Returning to my original question, I asked myself repeatedly how students perceive CP - or whether they do at all?

Their narratives often suggested that participatory and dialogic approaches intended to encourage students to think more critically and develop a questioning voice can be unpredictable. Moreover, consciousness-raising activities may be fine for students who are happy to embrace them whilst superfluous to others. Unfortunately, all too frequently orientations towards the former were drowned out by the latter.

In this way pedagogical approaches geared towards the acquisition of requisite credentials might represent a triumph of outcomes over processes. For example, practitioners using more traditional approaches (as in Rebecca's narrative) were perceived as 'better' teachers whilst critical pedagogues were sometimes viewed as in some way deficient. Perhaps it is understandable that students sometimes reject what they view as experimental pedagogy.

In such a climate progressive, consciousness raising practices of the 1970s and 1980s (favoured by Freire, Giroux and Shor) may well be perceived as outdated and unnecessary. Nevertheless, whether following traditional or critical approaches or not, I believe that practitioners (critical or otherwise) still need to meet student expectations in equipping them with credentials and skills for the world of work. Indeed, Freire (1985, 1996) questioned the extent to which it is really possible to transform society, yet deny students the knowledge they need to progress. This is a powerful argument that has much credence in the current economic climate.

As already indicated, the paradox between pursuing critical knowledge and giving students what they seem to want is well documented (Letherby & Marchbank, 1999a, 1999b). Put simply, pre-packaged and easily accessible knowledge may be valued over what seems to be unnecessary and superfluous critical approaches. Yet as Freire (in Apple, 1996: 84) points out:

...‘A pedagogy that focuses on production and consumption without any preoccupation about what we are producing, who it benefits, and who it hurts, is certainly not a critical pedagogy’.

No doubt possessing the credentials in today’s labour market may well be *a priori* and raises questions regarding what constitutes teaching and learning and who sets the agenda and I return to this issue in the final chapter.

Looking more closely at structures of power located within the student body, it is clear they cannot be viewed in a unitary manner (Britton & Baxter, 1994; Brine & Waller, 2004; Waller, 2006). Further, the different relational readings would suggest students orientate themselves towards a range of possibilities (ibid).

As I have already suggested, feminist post-structuralist studies highlight the multiple influences framing orientations and aspirations towards learning (Skeggs, 1995; Burke, 2002a, 2002b; Archer, Hutchings & Ross, 2003; Skeggs, 2004; Burke, 2006; Clayton, Crozier, & Reay, 2009; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). Undeniably, the very complexity of identity makes them enigmatic and unpredictable (Fuss, 1989; hooks, 1989; Britzman, 1991; Weiler, 1991). Because of this, a more nuanced understanding is called for (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Morley, 2002b). Therefore, practitioners may have to look attentively at structures of power located within the student body and the plausibility of conceiving them as non-traditional becomes uncertain.

For students and critical pedagogues, claims made for CP may be overly ambitious. Yet, reading for these relationships and re-visiting its founding principles could provide clues concerning its illusory nature. The student narratives suggest that relationships in which practitioners are conceived of as agents of empowerment, and students objects to be worked on, can be potentially oppressive and paradoxically obscuring. Thinking back to my discussion of Ellsworth's work in Chapter Three, she does acknowledge the misleading nature of discourses of empowerment suggesting that:

... 'Strategies such as student empowerment and dialogue give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationship intact' (1989: 306).

Dialogic and democratic pedagogy intended to inspire and enable students to think critically can be unpredictable and relational to social subjectivity. Given the structural and ideological terrains from which students speak, where neo-liberal discourses re-articulate the very meaning of getting an education, the contradictory nature and sheer impossibility of CP is perhaps not surprising.

In an environment where instrumentalism calls for performance and meeting criteria and learning outcomes, inevitably CP may also require re-contextualising to accommodate these new narratives. Recent policy initiatives in education aimed at widening participation and lifelong learning undoubtedly have risks attached to them. Increased use of grading, credentialism and creeping instrumentalism is changing the profile of students' learning identities and dispositions towards learning. What might feel like the appropriation of progressive ideals through neo-liberal policy discourses and a re-configuring of students' identities, certainly calls for caution concerning my own critical agency.

The emergence of a client driven pedagogy (possibly an anathema to proponents of the critical movement) may require further consideration. Accepting that students may feel different about pedagogy designed to disrupt authority and democratise the classroom may indeed be unavoidable (Morley 1998, 1999, 2002a). This poses a substantive challenge because, as Gore (1992) contends, education has become commodified and the nature of pedagogical relationships altered. Given the policy terrain in which pedagogues practise, learning to step outside of oneself as a way of acknowledging either one's own or others' identities, may be a challenging but necessary way forward. Acknowledging the relational and structural impediments to CP and developing an increased awareness of the conditions that truly support students with fragile learner identities may indeed be necessary. Although this may be an essential first step in doing so, it will not necessarily be an easy task. Avoiding deficit discourses, which construct students in certain ways, will always be problematic and this calls for addressing more explicitly the dynamics of identity within the context in which CP occur. The challenge however is how it can be done?

Thus far, the two narrative themes suggest it is relational within various contextual, linguistic and power-related contexts and student identities are often fragile and sometimes unknowable. Given the inter-sectional nature of identity, the nature of credentialism and criteria-driven curricula, I might well ask myself whether CP is still appropriate for Access students. Having looked at the two emerging stories I felt I had made some progress in establishing and understanding students' orientations.

As previously stated, I still felt I had not got below the surface concerning why critical modes of address, sometimes either misfire or fail to connect with students. I was convinced further exploration was necessary concerning why students may resist my critical intentions and how pedagogues could more effectively support those with fragile learner identities. My hope was that it would provide a way of understanding the pedagogical disappointment described at the start of the thesis.

Yet, stepping out of oneself calls for a greater understanding of what I know of my students and myself. Consequently, it may provide a starting point for a new and more contextualised pedagogy. I was convinced that developing a greater insight concerning students' lived experiences and shedding light on the conscious and unconscious rationales from which they speak, would provide a good starting point.

Narrative theme 3

SOMETHING'S GOING ON BUT I DON'T QUITE KNOW WHAT IT IS!

As my relational work suggests, identities are framed within and across social, cultural and often contradictory spectrums and it is no surprise student narratives are heterogeneous and often difficult to read. On this final reading of the student narratives, I wanted to give greater attention to how they felt their stories were perceived. Asking myself how I treat the stories and social realities of students, many talked of feeling vulnerable, expressing feelings of being 'stripped bare'. Listening to the various stories, sub-plots, contradictions and relational contexts from which they speak, it struck me that students' resistance could be formidable and required serious consideration. At the same time however, I was aware that I might resist or underplay student narratives that did not fit neatly with my own understandings and beliefs or dismiss theirs as mere prejudice, ignorance or a lack of industriousness.

Reflecting on how students were thinking, speaking, feeling and responding was important. As the narrative themes suggest, some students would position themselves differently at different times so were never really static and could be unpredictable. They were frequently underscored with words or phrases such as 'being fixed', 'stuck', 'let/letting go'. In the following extract, Sue mentions 'fixed' three times:

...‘Not being fixed about things and engaging with new ways of learning is hard...I mean we are so ingrained in ourselves and in fact whether you like it or not...it takes a few months to open up to new ways of thinking and letting go of what you might hold dear, I mean views and opinions you build over a lifetime is hard’.

I asked her for an explanation of what she meant by ‘ingrained’. She struggles with this:

...‘The ingrainedness I talk about, well its people sometimes having been away from education for a long time not letting go. On top of that...err many of us have worked for a long time and have children and families, so we have our own stories about the world and that’s our reality, our fixed understanding of the world. Take that away (their stories) and what is left?’

Describing student attachments to unconscious and ‘fixed’ understandings she narrates the sometimes ‘impossible’ nature of CP. Elaborating on this, she talks about the relational nature of stories that inform students’ lives:

...‘I don’t know whether we were so fixed at the start in our views and beliefs and I don’t think it is a conscious or intentional thing, but it made the possibility of reflection and coming to new ideas and different ways of seeing things, well almost impossible for you teachers and it’s a good job you are patient with us’.

Whilst clinging to her own ‘reality’ of things, rather interestingly she describes various motivations for resistance. She also contradicts herself saying it is better to stick to the ‘devil you know’, then immediately refers to being able to ‘adjust’ her ‘point of view’.

...‘We don’t all have enough experience of some new possibility so better to stick to the devil you know...but I was able to hear new things, and kind of adjust my point or points of view...and the activities we did to deepen our reflection helped...I just don’t know if everyone was always onboard or prepared for being reflective or critical, although I think I kind of was and I made a lot of effort to be more open-minded’.
(Sue 12 April, 2010)

What is interesting however is the way she talks of the possible appropriation of student stories and its potential to leave them bereft and without a credible story. Whilst new knowledge offers new possibilities for understanding and engaging with the world, at the same time, it has the potential to undermine and diminish the social worlds from which students speak.

Similarly Sean, who mentions 'fixed' four times, recognises the problem of being fixed and inflexible:

...‘There are many people in our classes who just cannot open up to new possibilities they can't let go. By that I mean they have their opinions and views and I mean look at, well I'm not going to say, but so and so in the social work class hasn't let go of her story and can't see any other way of seeing things... anyway they are too set in their ways and never really been prepared to question their own position'.

I invited him to expand on this and his words convey the extent to which, for some, being a student involves considerable 'soul searching' and, the potential for feeling 'stripped bare'. In the following quote the contradictory nature of dialogical and reflective pedagogy, intended to help students develop a questioning voice (or even lead to personal and social transformation) can have unpredictable consequences:

...‘Teachers may well be getting us to reflect and be more critical about different theories or ways of looking at something familiar in a different way and you have to do a lot of soul searching and it's just very hard letting go of things you have always believed...you have your views and they may be fixed and people may laugh at them, but it's what you know, it's your reality and giving up or changing your outlook and letting go can leave you feeling stripped bare'.

Perceptions of feeling 'stripped bare' were not uncommon and beginning to trouble me. I asked for greater detail concerning how pedagogical approaches intended to democratise and empower students could do this. Sean's words are profound and speak of the relational powerlessness already mentioned, saying something about why emancipatory teaching practises sometimes fail to connect with their intended audiences.

Looking back he recollects:

...‘A lot of soul searching goes on for many of us and after being a few weeks on the course some people just crumble don’t they... getting people to reflect on and talk about different theories or data can destroy some students own constructions of themselves....stripping what’s left of their experience...I mean it’s all new, so resisting the sort of teaching approaches you describe and believe in, well it’s like us safeguarding ourselves and sticking with or holding on to your reality it’s a sort of protection isn’t it from other students, from what you read and even teachers’ views... I mean your story and your role in life it is the only one you may have had or know’.

(Sean 9 May, 2010)

Although relational connections with peers and feelings of powerlessness that can surface are real, the idea that students would ‘crumble’ on engaging with teaching materials and dialogical discussions was disturbing. Tracing student voices in relation to CP suggests they are complicated, contextual and often multi-layered. Moreover, this resistance was often characterised by relational struggles and could be conscious or unconscious. Alyson and Beverley talk about feelings of ‘failing’ and the introspection that can undermine students’ long-held narratives in relation to their own familial roles:

Alyson:

...‘When people try and help, some people try and kick against the sort of critical teaching you talk about, maybe or for whatever reason they just resent being invited to be more reflective and critical...it makes them look at themselves in a failing sort of way. I mean personally I have also felt that way and I’m not the first one to feel like that’.

Her observation seems to illustrate how students sometimes react when engaging in what they might view as negative discourses. Rather interestingly, she moves from the collective (‘some’, ‘others’ or ‘them’) attaching herself to ‘others’ feelings before expressing they were also very much her own.

I could not help thinking this was a very sensitive issue for her and it really does seem to demonstrate the influence literature, theory and/or data can have on students' lived realities. It is not just about students feeling 'vulnerable' with pedagogues and/or peers; it is the feeling of discomfort and 'stigma' attached to those relationships. The next segment of Alyson's narrative illustrates this quite well:

*... 'Well let's say peer reviews and discussions for example, then you are in a (pause) well a vulnerable position because if you have been looking at negative ideas in the literature, say about parenting, well it can make you feel bad about yourself and I did not expect to feel like that when we were invited to reflect on and discuss selected readings etc...it can feel like, well even like you're a bad parent...you feel exposed to what others think and feel and its very personal and I know teachers might not want you to feel bad but it still happens'.
(Alyson 13 April, 2010)*

Beverly also talks about the 'personal' nature of lessons and feelings of inadequacy that literature and theory can produce in relation to familial expectations and parenting. Her words speak of the real sensitivity and possible resistance both she and her peers can feel towards what I considered critical approaches to sometimes uncomfortable topics. Beverly's words encapsulate these feelings:

... 'I think sociology is (extremely strong emphasis on 'is') a very personal lesson...obviously we're all part of the social world...and some people may think they're something they're not...I have actually felt that in sociology because I am on benefits at the moment whilst I am studying...and it seems much of the literature is negative about people on benefits and even implies you might be less of a parent and it's something I resent'.

I asked her to say more concerning her feelings about working with literature, theory and the various activities she had been involved in. I was surprised that there was a resistance to critical and dialogical activities, but at the same time, intrigued concerning whether these represented active resistance or simply an unconscious one.

She goes on to say:

...‘I remember being asked to work with other students critiquing theories in relation to our own lives and was uncomfortable a lot of the time and activities and discussion could be so unpredictable and I am not sure if it was about people feeling bad or guilty or just not feeling comfortable personally I mean...but some students seemed consciously not accepting anything contrary to their own views whereas others would...and I am not sure that’s because they felt guilty...I don’t always think people know what they are doing, I mean how their attitude and stance affect things in the classroom because it can colour any activity and undermine things’.

These extracts epitomise the difficulties students continually talked about, of having to resist feelings of ‘guilt’ or ‘guilty’ (these words featured a great deal) on returning to education. Indeed, not ‘taking things personally’ or feeling ‘guilty’ may be part of common resistances encountered on a daily basis.

Listening to Beverley and Alyson’s narratives, I could hear they were struggling with feelings of guilt and/or of being a ‘bad’ parent and feeling ‘exposed’. They expressed feelings relational to what they were reading, their tutors, peers and powerful discourses (often encountered in literature or other material) concerning what constitutes good or bad parenting. Beverley’s words correspond with these feelings quite powerfully:

...‘I remember thinking, hang on they’re categorising certain parents in a certain way and I am thinking they’re saying working class families use restricted codes and it’s a stigma or guilt thing relating to the way I parent...maybe I’m thought of as a parent who doesn’t explain things to their children when in fact I do...it seems like a bit of an attack I’m seen as a bit of a bad parent but then you step back and think...I’m not gonna take things personally or feel guilty it’s very easy to and that’s the problem with some of the student focused study activities and literature we’re encouraged to reflect on and criticise’.
(Beverley 8 April, 2010)

These extracts provide a real insight concerning how students’ understandings of their social world are permeated with difficulties and anxieties.

It surprised me that although I had pointed out to students there was literature supportive of all types of familial arrangements; it seemed that the negative discourses were more powerful. Naturally, students may seek to guard against or re-position themselves in the face of pre-selected teaching materials and what they may view as unpredictable relationships with practitioners and peers.

Nonetheless, I felt there was further work to be undertaken concerning resistance and relational experiences and anxieties already mentioned. I was keen to gain a better understanding how these manifested themselves in the classroom: was it conscious or unconscious resistance or was there something else going on? Michael's words resonated quite well with what had already been said by other students, but he was prepared to go even further:

...‘Looking back on when I was here I was just thinking, I wonder if some of us do it unconsciously the resistance thing I mean, but I don't think it's done out of malice...more like some people are continually protecting themselves...don't you think it could be from their own personal experience side of things...I know from my own experience I did not always agree with what was going on in the classroom and didn't like some of the material we read or agreed with at all’.

Neither confirming nor refuting conscious or unconscious resistances he describes where, through re-articulation, concealment or a kind of re-positioning of his own beliefs he felt less ‘exposed’:

...‘When it came to discussing our experiences let's say race and education or how families work, I was not one to stand up for what I necessarily believed at all...I mean we were encouraged to reflect on theories and things and arrive at a different interpretation of how things are and I might not have felt comfortable with that, so I was a bit cagy about saying what I really felt (much emphasis here) or whether I agreed, or I might even have gone along with everyone else...I mean with either what teachers said and either theirs or other students' views of the world and would not buy in to all I heard, but I did not want to feel uncomfortable or exposed so I guarded against that’.

I asked Michael to elaborate on why he would ‘not stand up’ for what he ‘believed’ and/or adopting a position other than his own. His comments are consistent with the risks and uncertainty students have already mentioned concerning disclosing their stories:

...‘I don’t think it’s a deliberate thing and I don’t think I was always conscious of doing it...I just think it can be too risky, I mean I have certain views (hesitant pause) and maybe in class some people only wanted their story told ‘cos their story was the most important one to them...in the end I know my story had value and although I knew opening up and being prepared to take onboard new stories and ideas was a good thing, it’s just hard to give up your own take on things, I mean it’s sort of deep inside who you are...a part of you and risky to share with others’.
(Michael 4 June, 2010)

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The above extracts raise some interesting questions in relation to the multi-positioning and resistances to storytelling and sharing students might adopt. They also offer some insight into how identity and particular orientations concerning disclosure can impoverish critical intentions. Thinking about the assumptions I make concerning CP, I have not always appreciated how much taking away (if that is what students feel) leaves them feeling vulnerable. When I asked them to reflect on their journey in recent years and the most challenging aspects of CP, clearly there had been epiphany moments for some whilst for others, at the time, this may have represented an appropriation of long-held personal narratives. As Ellsworth, Gore and Weiler have already suggested, it illuminates the dangers of assuming classrooms are democratic spaces in which critical and dialogical work can be freely undertaken, when in fact they may not be.

Acknowledging the various assumptions students make concerning learning, helps situate anxieties and resistance within broader societal and relational contexts. Undoubtedly, attachment to stories concerning students' lived-realities may well be conscious or unconscious. However, they may be the only ones they have and clearly, anxieties concerning losing one's own story and/or feeling 'stripped bare', creates insecurity and uncertainty. Given the sheer range of students on the programme and the intersectional nature of identity, finding neat pedagogical solutions to the concerns students raised may remain elusive (Reay, 2003; Reay, David & Ball 2005; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010).

If I am to prepare them for the potentially uncomfortable feelings CP can induce, it is worth thinking about relational ontologies and the realities of students' lives. Reflecting on what is spoken of the structures, context and constructs (often unsaid) which students inhabit may contribute towards a more contextualised and informed pedagogy. Student lives are undeniably multi-layered and sometimes unknowable. Unsurprisingly, they may cling on to long-held epistemologies in relation to knowledge and meaning-making, but should I be critical of them for resisting my stories – or what I define as truth?

As all three narrative themes demonstrate, returning to the classroom can be both complex and challenging for Access students. Paying closer attention to their truths, students' cultures may have to be more fully integrated within CP. Furthermore, bringing into question what I think I know of students, and myself, might provide a starting point. As I have already suggested (see narrative theme two) this stepping out of oneself may indeed be necessary.

CHAPTER 8 - CONCLUDING DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF MY STUDY

Having discussed the three narrative themes emerging from my research, in this concluding chapter I shall consider the implications of my thesis. I reflect on its professional relevance and its value to a wider community of practice and how I might disseminate my research findings. In doing so, I problematise the extent to which the gap between my own critical intentions and that of students can be attributed to recent neo-liberal policies and the changing context of Access programmes.

Reflecting on the increased use of outcome-based curricula/criteria and the extent to which it may be intensifying resistance to CP, I shall also consider whether this may demand an alternative pedagogy - one which is re-envisioned to accommodate new and emerging discourses. Finally, having given considerable thought concerning researching one's own practice, I reflect on the possible limitations of my study.

Returning to my original research question, this thesis concerns itself with developing a greater understanding of why some Access to HE students embrace CP whilst others resist. It reflects a professional concern about why, on some occasions, certain pedagogical modes of address fail to connect with students. In this respect, it is worth thinking about the pedagogical misfiring and disappointment described in Chapter One. From the very start of this thesis, I expressed a concern that my students often viewed critical teaching practices in a de-contextualised way and pedagogically speaking, something was being lost in translation.

I was concerned that the unstructured conversations should address the three original guiding questions set out in Chapter One:

1. How do Access to HE students engage with CP and why do some resist?
2. What are the underlying motivations behind students' rhetorical and discursive positions towards CP?
3. How can critical practitioners support Access students with fragile learner identities through the programme?

This thesis has explored students' narratives concerning the interpersonal and social relationships that shape and inform their assumptions concerning CP. I have suggested that deeper connections need to be made between pedagogical approaches and relational, structural and ideological forces that shape student narratives. They also say something about why critical modes of address either misfire or fail to connect.

Undeniably, Access to HE students orientate themselves towards a range of possibilities (Brine & Waller, 2004; Waller, 2006) and pedagogy intended to inspire and enable students to think critically can be unpredictable and relational to social subjectivity. Furthermore, neo-liberal discourses re-articulating the very meaning of getting an education may be re-configuring student identities and dispositions towards teaching and learning. Thinking more deeply about why my critical intentions sometimes might fail to connect with students has been a long-standing professional concern. I have struggled with this question throughout the EdD programme and continue to do so in the classroom and beyond. During the IFS I felt I had started to address so called ignorance and resistance to CP, but to reiterate, ended up in something of an intellectual cul-de-sac, my professional concerns unanswered.

Part of the problem was a methodological weakness in that I had only partially adapted the VCR method. Using only two of the four strands available I needed to deepen my analysis and, as a way of providing richer data, expand on the range and number of students previously researched within the IFS. This thesis attempts to do just that and using both additional students and all the relational strands, I have developed three student narrative themes. However, pulling them together and making sense of them has been a considerable challenge. I was mindful there are no right ways to reconstruct and represent the students' lives (Hammersley, 1983). The challenge lay in making sense of and integrating data in such a way it could inform professional practice and be of use for a wider community. I need to re-emphasise that bringing my data together, although enjoyable, was a lengthy process (Strauss, 1987). Failures in critical modes of address are both complex and fluid and because of this, looking afresh at how CP works within Access programmes is essential. Several key areas for consideration emerged from the research, including developing a greater understanding of the relational, structural and ideological forces that shape and inform student resistance. Working within and drawing on critical, feminist and post structuralist feminist literature, this thesis provides an insight into what resistances might be relational to – as a way of making them better known. It has raised four key issues:

1. Students do indeed sometimes misperceive critical intentions;
2. Increased use of outcome-based curricula and criteria may intensify resistances to pedagogy;
3. Pedagogical resistance may demand an alternative pedagogy – one which is re-envisioned to accommodate new narratives;
4. In developing alternate pedagogical approaches, critical pedagogues need to look more closely at the lived realities of students' lives as a way forward.

The unstructured conversations and emergent student narratives suggest that learning is seldom straightforward. I believe that student learning identities and dispositions have been altered by neo-liberalist education policy and in turn, this may be changing the nature of Access programmes. Whilst many students still embark on the programme with the idea that education is intrinsically a good thing and worth pursuing for its own sake, others may adopt a more instrumentalist approach. Furthermore, changes in the ages and social mix of students identified in Chapter Two and increased use of outcome-based curriculum and criteria may exacerbate the situation. It is hardly surprising therefore, that students want a pedagogy that produces results.

Thinking back to Chapter Three, Beck's (1992) contention that getting an education can insulate against certain risks is a persuasive one (Ecclestone, 2002a, 2002b). In this sense, education may well have become more of a political act: one that is fraught with fragility and risk. There is undoubtedly a political motivation behind increased numbers of adults engaging in formal education under the auspices of policies such as lifelong learning and related initiatives. In what Beck calls a process of individualisation – a way of managing associated hazards and insecurity. Given the high stakes involved in returning to learning, students may undoubtedly feel different about themselves.

The idea that they might undertake an Access course in order to make a wider contribution to society (a more holistic disposition to education) may become less apparent in both older and younger students. Whilst getting an education as a way of finding gainful employment, may indeed encourage more instrumental dispositions, students can hardly be criticised for this.

Within an emerging ideology of risk aversion, students may well become clients or consumers. In turn, where education becomes a commodity, invariably pedagogical relationships will be altered. However, as suggested in Chapter Two, although learning careers are by no means unique, Access students are invariably motivated to develop more positive ones: re-invoking Sean's words from theme one, to be 'going somewhere' because it:

...‘means you’re going somewhere and I think the more qualifications you have the better chances you have of getting a better job and a better life’.

The various narrative themes would suggest that dispositions to learning are shaped both by the past and present experiences and can be stable and/or fluid. The impact of students' material circumstances such as those arising from familial commitment, can also pose considerable risks. Whilst personal transformation might increasingly be viewed as the responsibility of individual students, their narratives say something about the cost of undertaking, which can for some, can be overwhelming (Reay, Ball & David, 2002; Reay, 2003).

Undoubtedly, recent neo-liberal changes in education policy have had a significant impact on the context within which I practise and I ask myself about the extent to which it is really feasible to pursue CP. If I am to continue pursuing my emancipatory visions, given the emphasis on performance and achievement, the stakes may be high. Thinking back to the students' narratives, it may be an increasingly difficult task when the transfer of official knowledge is often favoured over more emancipatory pedagogy. I may well have entered the teaching profession with progressive values and liberatory intentions towards students, but working to inspire and enable them to think critically can be unpredictable.

Moreover, if neo-liberal policies re-position education as an economic endeavour, and where quality and performance are all pervasive, the extent to which practitioners (critical or otherwise) are even empowered is worth consideration. Practitioners may be more concerned with meeting quality indicators and given the all pervasiveness of the performance-related discourses, the space in which critical and transformative pedagogy can be undertaken may be reduced. Following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, increased regulation, use of performance indicators and pressure to conform may have left some FE practitioners feeling increasingly de-professionalised (Randle & Brady 1997a; 1997b; Ball, 2003; Avis, 2007). Moreover, for some, the proliferation of bureaucratic requirements and regulation has led to an intensification of work and a corresponding lack of autonomy (Pollitt, 1990; Ainley & Bailey 1997). Demands for increased student numbers, under-funding and the challenges of meeting increasingly stringent performance indicators may make excessive demands on practitioners. For Randle and Brady (1997a: 134) what could be viewed as a growing 'proletarianisation' of FE practitioners' role might render progressive intentions outmoded. Rather than abandoning CP, more reflexivity concerning the lived realities of students may provide for a platform for developing new alternate pedagogical approaches. Different theoretical discourses concerning CP can be evangelical, naïve and deterministic regarding the possibility of individual agency. Consciousness-raising pedagogy that acknowledges the value of life history and experiential learning may be an anathema to some of students, but this does not mean they should be abandoned. As the various narratives themes suggest, they are still attractive and viable in terms of their emancipatory vision.

If the nature of pedagogical relationships is changed, this may reinforce conscious acts of refusal to engage with inner reflection. However, this does not mean that as a constituent of knowledge, resistance cannot teach us anything. I am calling for a better understanding of the personal struggles students describe in the various narratives; what is relational to identity and particular orientations towards teaching and learning.

Albeit tentatively, my research points towards some restoration between the new educational terrains from which students speak and a squaring of any transformatory visions I (or other critical pedagogues) might have. Consequently, I believe deeper connections could be made between CP and its potential value for contextualising the situations and range of emotions students talked of.

Attachment to stories concerning the students' lived-realities may be natural. Unsurprisingly, they may cling on to long-held epistemologies in relation to knowledge and what it means to learn. Whilst encouraging students to slowly but surely become co-investigators in critical conversations, at the same time, it will be necessary to acknowledge that such encounters may not always be fruitful. Whether deliberate or otherwise, resistance may be characterised by defensiveness, anxiety, sometimes anger and on occasions, blatant prejudice. However, being wary of attributing these reactions to ignorance or envisaging students as oppressors of my (or others) emancipatory intentions is necessary. By listening more closely to students' lived realities I can undoubtedly learn from them and incorporate this knowledge into a new pedagogy; one that is less abstract and more contextualised.

I believe that CP should be about bringing to the fore student resistance and helping them recognise knowledge is socially constructed, contestable and on occasions, even unpleasant (Jay, 1987). However, it will be crucial to help them understand that anxiety, defensiveness or resistance, as certain truths are made known, may only be natural. As feminist literature discussed in Chapter Three suggests, previous experiences of the classroom may be too painful to remember. Undertaking this study has allowed me to re-visit and look at related issues as a way of informing and developing my professional practice.

Given the educational policy changes outlined and students' dispositions towards CP, I feel the challenge is immense, but is undoubtedly worth engaging with. It is important for critical pedagogues to acknowledge students' own views of the world. Inevitably this may generate the misperception and tensions students have expressed concerning CP. Nevertheless, acknowledging more fully the reasons why resistance occurs in relation to students' biographies may lead to a better understanding of learning identities and dispositions throughout the Access programme. This could be a more contextualised approach in which the excavation of the relational from which resistances might originally emerge is undertaken.

As the students' narratives suggest, anxieties concerning losing one's own story or feeling 'stripped bare' creates unpredictability. Learning to step outside of oneself may provide a way of acknowledging and understanding one's own and student identities - making the unknowable more known. The relational impediments of which students speak may also help in developing greater awareness of the conditions that truly support fragile learner identities.

Critical discourses are still important for students even though they may be subsumed in a language shaped and imbued by consumerist discourses. The students often talked of positive changes having occurred within themselves and how they are viewed by others. In this sense, it could be argued that something transformatory still happens and this should not be underplayed. I feel the challenge that lies ahead is to find ways in which critical pedagogues can work with students whilst acknowledging the contextual constraints I have identified, but work in ways that still enable expression through dialogical encounters (Simon, 1987).

WHAT DID I LEARN? THE PROFESSIONAL RELEVANCE OF MY STUDY

Although complex and sometimes paradoxical, I believe my research can contribute to critical practitioners' understanding of student resistance. Rather than blaming students entirely for resistance or attributing this simply to ignorance, any alternative pedagogy should be sensitive to the socio and cultural conditions from which resistance emerges in the first place. Acknowledging structural and ideological forces in relation to the assumptions students make concerning returning to learning, rather than routinely attributing perceptions of past failure to the personal, may provide a start.

Of course not every student or practitioner (critical or otherwise) will want to respond, but some may do and the research work I have undertaken on the EdD programme has sought to address their needs and concerns. Needless to say, critical pedagogues and students may experience difficulties in finding the space in which emancipatory practices can occur.

Practitioners may also be simply unwilling to function as critical educators and given recent educational reforms, student resistance is unlikely to go away any time soon. Whilst accepting there are no pedagogical panaceas to the various resistances students talked of, bringing them to the fore may be essential as a way forward. I would argue that rather than casting students in deficit or resistor roles, pedagogues need to be learning about them *all* the time. In other words take another look and start to become researchers of and/or, 'students of their students' (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009: 478). Indeed, the contradictions and impossibilities that flowed from students' narratives demands that any alternative pedagogy should be examined in the light of those experiences.

However, for this to happen, critical practitioners will need to make transparent the natural connections between changes in current educational reforms and wider societal changes, curricula, subject materials, and what these might mean for students. Developing a greater understanding concerning the moral imperatives and contradictions that shape their narratives and reflecting on what is spoken of the structures, contexts and constructs students inhabit may offer a more nuanced and informed pedagogy. Indeed, consciousness-raising activities that may appear superfluous and pedagogically intrusive to students need not be abandoned. Yet as Freire and Shor (1987) point out, critical pedagogues could think more reflexively about developing the skills and credentials students expect and at the same time, make known the ideologies and value assumptions embedded within their expectations.

As I stated at the start of this thesis, I am in no way intending to politically radicalise my students, acknowledging that my pedagogical approach (whether in selecting teaching resources, method of assessment or mode of delivery) constitutes what Freire would call a political act – it is inescapable. A good starting point for making this known would be in making transparent to students the partiality of any given knowledge and the importance of being prepared to question and challenge (Usher, 1997).

Invariably this may be problematic because I am always implicated in the very structures I may be trying to change. As Burke (2002a, 2002b) suggests, in terms of classroom practice, any attempt to de-construct unequal power relations may necessitate a reflexive examination of the ways in which I might be implicated in perpetuating the very inequalities I seek to confront. In this sense thinking about how authority and power are deployed within the classroom and the extent I can prevent it, is crucial.

Undoubtedly, encouraging students to be self-reflexive concerning these questions can provide a conceptual framework for answering them. If teaching is cast in the form of what Giroux (in Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009) refers to as a language of possibility or hope, then a greater potential exists for making learning relevant and overcoming what appears on the surface to be superfluous. Being prepared to rethink and reformulate pedagogical practice in accordance with its founding principles and as a way of overcoming students' discomfort, increasing instrumentalism and resistance may be vital. Nevertheless acknowledging the relational, structural and ideological contexts from which students speak will also be crucial.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCHING ONE'S OWN PRACTICE

This thesis suggests critical practitioners should take another look at the nature of resistance. It is particularly timely with the emergence of grading within Access programmes and universities increasingly requiring that a certain number of credits be achieved at a given grade. The spirit of Access - something I cherish so much - is undergoing a change and with the introduction of increased university tuition fees in 2012, instrumentalism is unlikely to recede. As students undertake their journey from FE to HE, the challenge for pedagogues may be immense. Access students' resistance to CP may well increase and the dichotomy between pedagogues' emancipatory visions and students' expectations may be more noticeable. This raises the potential for both disappointment and possible conflict.

In terms of researching my own practice, I have been reinvigorated concerning what I can still achieve with my students and thinking about sources of resistance. As a critical practitioner, I want to re-engage in a dialogue with my students, encouraging the very conditions in which CP can flourish. Reflecting on the three narrative themes, I get a strong sense that making my critical intentions more explicit to students at the start of the Access programme is absolutely crucial - what I am trying to achieve with them and why - is fundamental. However, what am I to do if they do not possess the vocabulary in which CP is articulated and how am I to avoid undermining some students' learner identities? Nevertheless, making known notions of inequality and deep-seated ideological meanings embedded within students' expectations (for example, getting the right grades, qualifications and skills for work) can still be brought into question and deconstructed as they are learnt.

In this sense, undertaking additional collaborative research work with students concerning CP may provide a way of developing practice in the light of new and emerging orientations in the classroom.

DISSEMINATION OF MY FINDINGS - WHERE TO NEXT?

In thinking about where I should take my research next I have a number of key questions and concerns. For example:

1. Who would be affected most by my research?
2. Who would be interested in learning about the study findings and whether it would be of interest to a broader academic community?
3. What forums or opportunities would be available for disseminating my findings?

As already suggested, I cannot necessarily claim too much on the basis of my own experience or represent the views of all Access students, critical practitioners or all FE colleges. However, having spent a considerable period of time on my thesis researching a professional concern, I am determined to do something with it rather than let it gather dust on a shelf. As a practitioner-researcher, I have an ethical obligation to ensure that research findings are disseminated to research participants, practitioners within my own institutions and to a wider community of practice. Whilst accepting that not everyone would want to subscribe to or agree with my call for a new pedagogy and may feel unable to do so – some might. At the heart of my plans for dissemination is a desire to develop a community of practice for sharing my findings and continue developing CP. Having already discussed my research work with OCNSER, I intend to give a paper at their forthcoming regional forum and conference, making more regular contributions in the future.

There is also scope to undertake some work at a national level and I intend to pursue this further. This is really important because I do not want to stop reading, writing and researching and intend to pursue my research interests in the future. As part of a group of institutions working with local HE providers (typically universities) in the south east region, work is already underway to build closer liaisons with other local colleges concerning the pedagogical challenges outlined in this thesis and its meaning for practitioners. I am also in the process of contributing to OCN SER Journal of Access to HE and although this not likely to happen until the next academic year, I intend to make a number of submissions. My hope is that by/through disseminating any findings, I will generate more interest concerning how CP can be re-energized or re-envisioned in what is a challenging educational terrain.

FINAL COMMENTS - IF I HAD TO DO IT ALL AGAIN?

I believe that one of the most important things about the EdD programme and working towards completing this thesis has been developing more nuanced and refined academic skills and the contribution it has made to my professional practice. I do not want to overstate my progress, but during this time, I have grown in confidence (immensely so), both academically and as a researcher-practitioner. I have also undergone a number of positive changes in my own career, including leading the Access to HE and post-compulsory teacher training programmes. My work has also allowed me to participate in a Widening Participation Conference at the IOE and more recently, assume a more prominent role within OCN SER.

Of course, as I reflect back on my thesis work I know that if I had to do it all again, well, there would be a number of issues I would take into consideration. Undertaking this study it has become clear to me that a shorter length EdD thesis imposes certain restrictions and requires difficult decisions concerning what I would include or omit. On reflection, perhaps my research questions were a little over-ambitious for a 45,000 word thesis and getting the scale of the research right was always a challenge. In spite of this, I have tried to undertake my study in such a way that a sense of balance and coherence has been preserved. I have also endeavoured to address with clarity the operational and ethical issues raised in researching one's own setting and have been transparent concerning processes and decision-making undertaken along the way.

On a practical note balancing work and academic studies has been demanding. It has not always been easy finding the time required to undertake a substantive piece of academic work. Nevertheless, during this time, as credentialism and instrumentalism have continued to increase, my professional concerns have become all the more important. In this sense, I believe my study is of real value and worthy of further exploration. Thinking ahead, I do not want to detach myself from the kinds of pedagogical issues and struggles that are of professional concern to me. My hope is that completing the EdD will provide the catalyst for further research and although inescapably complex, it is an endeavour worth undertaking.

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APPENDIX 1 - PROFILE OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY

- **CURRENTLY UNDERTAKING THE ACCESS PROGRAMME**

SUE

Undertaking the social work pathway and now in her late thirties Sue is a mother of three children. She has worked part-time in retail and gained a wealth of experience. Describing herself as working class and proud of her roots and achievements as a single parent, Sue wanted to change her life. Having previously dropped out of education having been unsuccessful, she was apprehensive about undertaking the programme yet insistent about changing the direction of her life. Sue was also apprehensive concerning the need to meet grading criteria and sensitive about how others might view her.

ALYSON

On the humanities pathway Alyson talked about the risks involved in embarking on what she viewed as a new and exciting journey. Married, in her mid-forties, with two children and a career in management behind her, she was passionate about pursuing a degree in theology. From a middle-class background and financially secure, she was determined to pursue her ambitions, and made considerable lifestyle adjustments to do so. Nevertheless, she also had trepidations concerning previous educational experiences and was particularly concerned about being perceived as somehow deficient. Reflecting on her time at school, she talked of the fear and anxieties she experienced and worried that these might re-surface during the programme.

BEVERLEY

In her late thirties and single, Beverley is a mother of two children, who worked part-time and had an extremely hectic life. From a working class family and having originally left school at age sixteen, she had little experience of formal education. Looking back at sometimes negative pedagogical relationships and experiences, she was quite rueful concerning not having achieved her full potential and undertaking the programme was a big commitment. Indeed, she viewed passing the Access course as a way forward that would enable her to exorcise past - what she perceived as past failures. Beverley did not always find the classroom environment a comfortable place for sharing personal experiences and on occasions, experienced feelings of guilt in relation to familial expectations and that of being a 'good' parent.

AMELIA

Undertaking the business and law pathway and in her early thirties Amelia was passionate about pursuing what she viewed as a new start. She had contemplated embarking on an Access course for some time and it taken some considerable courage for her to actually enrol on the programme. Having left school early she was very candid about school life not having been good and expressed fears that her lack of qualifications was self-limiting. Amelia was concerned that having a busy family life might make focusing on passing assignments difficult and despite our efforts to alleviate her anxieties was always anxious about this. However, at the same time, the programme provided an opportunity for turning her life around and she was determined to achieve good grades.

BECKY

In her early twenties, Becky a single-parent and from an Afro-Caribbean background, also believed her lack of qualifications held her back. Having grown up in a single-parent family, she was conscious of getting onto a nursing degree programme at what she viewed as a 'good' university. She freely admitted to not having worked hard at school and that this time it would be 'different'. Becky was very much her own person and sure of her chosen direction, but at times, demonstrated some vulnerability in the classroom.

SEAN

Undertaking an Access course was something of a big decision for Sean. A middle aged working class student, who had successfully run his own business, he was passionate about studying ancient history. Having attended a grammar school, he talked of having fallen on difficult times and talked of getting his life 'together again'. Being successful with his studies was extremely important and Sean repeatedly talked of having not been very academic but nevertheless, wanting to go 'somewhere'.

- **UNDERTAKING THE FIRST OF THEIR DEGREE PROGRAMME**

DENIS

From an Afro-Caribbean background, in his late thirties and completing his first year at university, Denis already possessed some basic academic qualifications. Coming from a privileged background, he also admitted to having had a rather 'chequered educational experience'. The Access to psychology pathway was the culmination of what he viewed as a way back into full-time education. He was also painfully aware of being a mature student and wanted to pursue his ambition of studying for a degree in criminology.

Happy to reflect on his personal journey, he talked about what was initially a ‘fragile’ start on the programme and a challenging first year at university.

MICHAEL

Also a first year university student, Michael talks of the same kind of loneliness former Access students have experienced. Single, in his mid-twenties and from a working class background, he had not performed well at school. Working part-time as a retail manager and studying for a degree in history, he was determined to make a ‘success of things’.

- **UNDERTAKING THE SECOND YEAR OF HER DEGREE PROGRAMME**

DONNA

For Donna, the Access course was pedagogically different from her previous educational experiences. Living on a large ex-council estate, Donna was in her second year at university and studying psychology. A young single-mother in her late twenties, her educational experience was rather fragmented. As a non-traditional student, she appreciated how ‘getting critical’ at an early stage could help in better ‘knowing’ oneself and provide something of a bulwark against the ‘aloneness’ students have already acknowledged.

- **APPROACHING THE END OF THE THIRD YEAR OF THEIR DEGREE PROGRAMME**

YVONNE AND REBECCA

Formerly on the social work and nursing pathways, they were third year students and close to gaining their degrees. Both were balancing studies with familial responsibilities and part-time employment. Yvonne was from a professional middle class background and having previously dropped out of college, reflected back on those experiences.

She talked about CP as a crucial factor in managing the ‘ups and downs’ of academic life and how awareness of ‘self’ in relation to subject material could help in better understanding one’s position and circumstances.

Like other Access students, Rebecca’s experiences of school had also been troubled and this was of concern. From a ‘comfortable background’ [her words] and with a husband who was ‘well educated’, she wanted to become a professional social worker.