RETHINKING ‘LEARNING’ IN HIGHER EDUCATION
Viewing the Student as Social Actor

BY

KEVIN F. WILLIAMS
University of Cape Town
kevin.williams@uct.ac.za

Abstract. A number of authors from different theoretical perspectives have called for new interdisciplinary ways of considering learning within the higher education context. Peter Jarvis’s lifelong learning perspective offers a viable alternative, but lacks a strong theory of the person as self, agent and actor. In response I propose that Margaret Archer’s realist social theory has a particular utility for bridging ‘common dualisms’ as part of an interdisciplinary enquiry into higher education learning, and offers a strong theory of the person.

Key words: agency; culture; higher education; lifelong learning; realism; structure; student learning

Introduction

Currently dominant frameworks for understanding learning in higher education focus on ‘student and teachers’ perceptions’, and on students and teachers within specific teaching contexts. They thus

underplay the importance of ... [student and teacher] ... identities and power relations in teaching and learning. This means that academics, students and their institutional contexts cease to have a history and that the explanatory framework is ahistorical.3

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1 My thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their generous advice and pointing to weaknesses in the original article. I have attempted to address these.
2 Centre for Open Learning, University of Cape Town, Room 3.24, Kramer Building, Rondebosch, 7700, South Africa. Kevin Williams has been involved in education development in various South African higher education institutions since 1994, and has a particular interest in human agency and decision-making, as well as student learning.

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In the light of the complexity of learning, more holistic, interdisciplinary approaches are needed. A number of authors press for engagement with social theory in the process of re-thinking learning. Phil Hodkinson, Gert Biesta and David James argue that the bridging of the ‘common dualisms’ of individual/social, mind/body, and structure/agency in understanding learning is needed. Expanding on this Hubert Ertl and Susannah Wright suggest that

Future research needs to make use of methodological frameworks that capture the mediated and contextualized nature of learning, as well as social and organizational aspects of learning. Also needed are studies that look at student experience in a holistic manner, linking academic learning with other aspects of student life.

Margaret Archer’s realist social theory offers a sociological contribution to an interdisciplinary enquiry into understanding learning as an emergent dialectical activity involving individual (mind, body), structure and agency. Archer offers a theoretical basis for examining the interplay between these ontologically different entities that appears compatible with the kind of research framework called for by Ertl and Wright.

Higher Education

While learning is not restricted to formal education, the focus of this paper is on learning within one aspect of formal education. Education (by which I understand the formal, structural attempts to convey and/or inculcate selected contents of a group’s cultural system to neophyte members of that group) has long been and remains a contested social space in the service of one or other benefactor. In its Western guise education finds its origins under religion. As with the Church, education became subservient to the demands and monies of the princes and nations that arose. Eighteenth-century Europe saw the more localized influence of industry and capital, but by the late nineteenth century, national identities and demands began

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6. This definition is based in part on Archer’s understanding of culture (Archer 1996, xviii–xix), but cognizant of other social realist work in the sociology of knowledge (Young 2008, especially chapter 14).
to impose upon education in all its forms.\textsuperscript{11} The influence shifted in the mid-twentieth century and early twenty-first century as global markets limited national state power and identity, and began increasingly to shape education, formal post-school education in particular, around the omnipresent market.\textsuperscript{12} Within this shifting landscape lies the contestation over the purpose and identity of higher education.

Adding complexity to this contestation is the globalizing temptation to ignore local interests regarding higher education’s purpose and shape. While global pressures continue to impact on the purpose and shape of all education, it is also true that the situational logics of local socio-cultural interaction make different demands and variously shape the constraints and enablements on the actors involved in higher education.\textsuperscript{13} In countries such as those in Eastern Europe, Africa and South America the socio-cultural situational logic is markedly different from those in North America, the European Union and Australasia,\textsuperscript{14} even if the debate is framed around global concepts such as transformation, widening access, and public and private good.\textsuperscript{15}

In the South African context from which this paper emerges, higher education is legally defined as ‘all learning programmed \textsuperscript{[sic]} leading to qualifications higher than grade 12 or its equivalent’.\textsuperscript{16} This excludes further education and training provision (i.e. formal, structured, post-year 10 and including year 12). The preamble to the Act is clear that the purposes of higher education are complex. It must ‘transform’ to meet the ‘human resource, economic and development needs’ of South Africa; redress past discrimination; provide ‘optimal opportunities for learning and the creation of knowledge’; ‘promote the full realization of the full potential of every student and employee’; contribute to ‘the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, in keeping with international standards’; and be conscious of the ‘national need for advanced skills and scientific knowledge’.\textsuperscript{17} This list resembles most national expectations of higher education, but as John Brennan, Roger King and Yann Lebeau note, the concerns for socio-political and economic redress for past injustice frames the discussion in a way that differs substantially from those of the previous colonial powers.\textsuperscript{18} Implicit in the

\textsuperscript{11} Brennan et al. 2010, 20.
\textsuperscript{12} Singh 2001; Badat 2009.
\textsuperscript{13} Brennan, King and Lebeau 2004, 19.
\textsuperscript{14} Brennan, King and Lebeau 2004, 58.
\textsuperscript{15} Singh 2001, 8.
\textsuperscript{17} South African Government 1997, Preamble.
\textsuperscript{18} See Brennan, King and Lebeau 2004 for a discussion of the way ‘transformation’ is understood and driven across national contexts.
above is an assumption about whether higher education (indeed any education) is a private or public good.

Concepts such as public good and private good are shifting and contested, and are used in ways that appear to be polarizing. Attempts to portray these as a mutually exclusive duality are misleading, as is the assumption that public good is simply an amalgam of individual private goods. Mala Singh provides a useful understanding of the public good of (higher) education:

> as a set of societal interests that are not reducible to the sum of interests of individuals or groups of individuals and that demarcate a common space within which the content of moral and political goals like democracy and social justice can be negotiated and collectively pursued.

By adopting an emergent understanding of public good, Singh allows us to recognize the individual as well as social good, but to guard against a collapse of one into the other. It resists public good being reduced to the demands of the market, while still insisting on space for the development of economic benefit.

Cautioned by Ron Barnett that collapsing higher education and ‘university’ is illegitimate, and in alignment with my reference to lifelong learning, my concern here is essentially in line with the South African government’s definition of higher education noted above: all formal learning programmes leading to qualifications beyond year twelve of schooling. In the South African context this includes a range of different categories of institutions (research-focused universities, comprehensive universities, universities of technology, private institutions focused purely on teaching, colleges of nursing, and so on). The primary characteristic I understand to be common among these exemplars is the intention to remove the student from a day-to-day social context for a variable period, to enable her to engage conceptually with knowledge and skills.

Saleem Badat argues for five roles for higher education.

1. **Cultivation of highly educated people** (prepare people ‘who can think theoretically and imaginatively; gather and analyse information with rigour; critique and construct alternatives and communicate effectively orally and in writing. Our task is not simply the dissemination of knowledge to students but also the induction of our students into the making of knowledge’).

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19 Badat 2009, 4.
21 Barnett 2011, 18.
22 Badat 2009, 7.
2. **Democracy and democratic citizenship** (‘we are “tasked with the arduous formation of a critical, creative and compassionate citizenry. Nothing less will suffice”’).\(^{23}\)

3. **Development needs and challenges** (‘Through teaching and learning, universities can develop a consciousness of myriad economic, educational, health, environmental and other problems, and through research they can confront and help contribute to their management and resolution’).\(^{24}\)

4. **Engagement with the intellectual and cultural life of societies** (a ‘key role of higher education is to proactively engage with our societies at the intellectual and, more generally, cultural level, and to contribute to the intellectual and cultural development of a critical citizenry. This entails a ‘cognitive and political praxis’\(^{25}\) undertaken through social commentary and critique and that is related to the shaping of world views and ideas, and social relations, institutions and practices’).\(^{26}\)

5. **Research and scholarship**: (‘to imaginatively and creatively undertake different kinds of rigorous scholarship – discovery, integration, application and teaching – and rigorous research, which has different purposes (fundamental, applied, strategic, developmental), aims and objects’).\(^{27}\)

Badat’s five roles urge higher education towards rethinking the way student learning is conceived, and to include the social and cultural. Badat’s roles, however, still tend to prioritize society’s concerns regarding learning over those of the student: student agency is barely acknowledged. Student centredness masquerades too easily as recognition of student agency, and (as I will argue later) what is regarded as learning is collapsed into what has been ‘taught’.

**Thinking Sociologically about Learning**

Sarane Boocock’s review of literature\(^{28}\) bemoaned the scant attention paid by sociology to learning. Her proposals were, however, limited to curriculum and pedagogy rather than learning. The common experience of both educa-

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\(^{23}\) B. O’Connel quoted in Badat 2009, 8.

\(^{24}\) Badat 2009, 10.


\(^{26}\) Badat 2009, 10.

\(^{27}\) Badat 2009, 11.

\(^{28}\) Boocock 1966.
tor and student is that learning and pedagogy are different activities. In practice student agency constantly confronts the structural results of pedagogic relations:

here is a purposeful intention to initiate, modify, develop or change knowledge, conduct or practice by someone or something which already possesses, or has access to, the necessary resources and the means of evaluating the acquisition. The acquirer may or may not define the relation as legitimate, or accept as otherwise, what is to be acquired.30

While the focus on the curriculum and pedagogy (including assessment) is important because the results of agents’ actions constrain or enable the projects held by other agents, this does not supplant the need for understanding learning on its own as an agential activity with structural consequences. For this to happen learning needs to be extracted from a vice-like linkage to teaching. For, as Jean Lave argues:

A close reading of research on how to improve learning shows that questions about learning are almost always met by educational researchers with investigations of teaching. This disastrous shortcut equates learning with teaching … It deprives us at one and the same time of clear analyses of learners as subjects – and of teachers as subjects as well.31

Anna Sfard and Peter Jarvis argue that no single-disciplinary perspective can offer a grand theory of learning.32 They suggest instead that different disciplinary lenses will illuminate facets of this complex phenomenon. The contribution of a sociological understanding of structure-agency relations is important for learning, for, as Martin Packer and Jessie Goicoechea note:

Learning presumes a social context – but in addition, person and social world are in dynamic tension, and community membership sets the stage for an active search for identity, the result of which is that both person and community are transformed. Learning entails both personal and social transformation – in short, ontological change.33

Recognizing that learning involves ontological change acknowledges a distinction between our knowledge of the world and the world as it is: what is real holds to account what may successfully be said about the world. Given this, Gordon Brown makes the point that ‘learning is better understood, not as a process grounded in empiricist or idealist conceptions of knowledge, but

29 I accept that pedagogy is agential; however, once enacted pedagogical relations become part of structure.
30 Bernstein and Solomon 1999, 267, my emphasis.
31 Lave 1996, 158.
as emergent from the ontology: a phenomenon emergent from an ensemble of causal mechanisms’. As Archer asserts, the development of knowledge involves the interplay between properties and powers of the subject and properties and powers of the object – be this what we can learn to do in nature (embodied knowledge), the skills we can acquire in practice (practical knowledge), or the propositional elaborations we can make in the Cultural System (discursive knowledge). Any form of knowledge thus results from a confluence between our human powers (PEPs) [Personal Emergent Powers] and the powers of reality – natural, practical and social.

Such a perspective permits a sociological lens on learning in the higher education context that avoids the twin poles of overly-individualistic, eremite conceptions of the learner in splendid isolation from society, or of products of the hydraulic forces of society. This may also help to analytically separate the strands of the Gordian knot of ‘teaching and learning’ evident in much higher education research, and permit recognition of reflexivity, peer interaction, and the ‘hidden curriculum’.

Rethinking ‘Learning’

Peter Jarvis’s lifelong learning focus offers an alternative to dominant higher education learning frameworks. Jarvis insists that learning is not limited to formal education, but is ‘life-long’ and ‘life-wide’: learning occurs throughout life, temporally and contextually. He challenges the reductions of lifelong learning to adult or work-place learning, or those that exclude formal education. Arguing that learning is fundamental to human evolution, Jarvis presents learning as the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.

54 Brown 2009, 6.
55 Archer 2000, 177. There is considerable realist literature within the sociology of knowledge that engages with knowledge construction, for example Young 2008; Maton 2004; Maton and Muller 2006; and Maton and Moore 2010. Maton in particular has relevance through his legitimation code theory, including ‘knower’ codes.
56 Haggis 2009; Lave 1996.
57 Bergenhenegouwen 1987, 536.
58 Jarvis 2009, xi.
59 Jarvis 2006, 49.
60 Jarvis 2009, 25.
In contradistinction to the Enlightenment focus on the isolated individual as learner, Jarvis insists that our living in relationships from birth is fundamental to understanding learning. Recognizing that structure and agency are fundamental, Jarvis argues that ‘the person, the self, who has emerged through the process of learning’ has the freedom to choose to act in accordance with structure and culture, or to act innovatively. That freedom lies in individual reflexivity ‘through the interplay of thought, emotion and action’. The self, who has emerged through the learning relationships of early life, ‘becomes an agent’ and is able to ‘act back on the structures’ thereby changing social structure and culture ‘through learning’. For this reason understanding learning requires a critical approach that sees ‘the place of the human agent within the social context’. This confronts Jarvis with three questions:

When did the person become a self? When were the learners able to transcend their social surrounds and become agents? Were they always agents, or did agency emerge as a result of learning?  

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Jarvis: A Socially Mediated ‘Self’

In seeking answers to these questions Jarvis initially depends heavily on George Herbert Mead, Jürgen Habermas and Rom Harré, seeking a self through learning experiences. Jarvis’s conclusion offers a stratified view of the human including:

— a self, socially constructed around self-identity (‘It is only through interaction with others that children gradually develop a sense of themselves in time’);  
— a social identity – ascribed by others (including our names), and learned through ‘playing our roles’;  
— a personality – we are more than our roles, but the way we personify our roles, an admixture of habit, social constraint, and experience, defines our personality, and  
— a person – as self-reflexive, ‘We can be ourselves, as individual human persons, only in relationship with others as persons’.

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41 Jarvis 2006.  
43 Jarvis 2007, 35.  
45 Jarvis 2009, 201.  
46 Jarvis 2009, 204.  
47 Jarvis 2009, 204–6.  
48 Jarvis 2009, 207

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Jarvis argues for a socially constructed self who is an independent agent only through relationship in conversation: a discourse-dependent self. At the core of this person is ‘an agent who has an understanding of self as an agent’ – closely echoing Martin Heidegger’s *Dasein*. Jarvis’s answers, however, do not appear congruent with the strong sense of agency he calls for (above), for persons are left as gifts of society through society’s conversation(s). The student as social actor is absent, and learning depends purely on relations with others.

Despite never deserting the notion of ‘self/person’ as learned through social interaction, Jarvis later engages with Archer’s work. In doing so he raises what appear to be some contradictions between his definition of learning and his social theory. Jarvis recognizes that Archer’s realist social theory:

- challenges the Meadian (and Harréan) concept of the self as society’s gift;
- extends the internal conversation beyond Mead’s I-Me;
- insists on the primacy of practice over language;
- links learning to personal action;
- recognizes that ‘learning results either in maintenance or in innovation … of social practices’;
- insists on the centrality of the person, and
- asserts that ‘caring and emotion’ are fundamental to understanding the human person who learns.

If learning is life-wide it is therefore social-plus: learning also includes our relations with the natural and practical realms, something that Jarvis’s socially-dependent self does not acknowledge.

**Introducing Social Realism**

Archer describes her *morphogenetic approach* to social theory as ‘both an explanatory program (the methodological complement of critical realism),

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51 Jarvis 2007, 35; Archer 2000, 229 n. 20.
52 Jarvis 2009, 121; Archer 2003.
53 Jarvis 2009, 49; Archer 2000, 154–90.
57 Jarvis 2007, 18; Archer 2000, chapter 6, passim.
but also a means of accounting for the trajectories and dynamics of social formations’. A comprehensive review of Archer’s social realism project is beyond the bounds of this paper. In view of their particular focus on agency I draw predominantly on three papers and three of her five volumes. It is also important to note the work of other critical realist scholars who provide a substantial basis for considering knowledge as objectively distinct from knower. This discussion, however, will be limited to the sociological concepts raised by Jarvis as key to understanding learning: structure, culture and agency.

Understanding structure

‘Structure’ and ‘agency’ are rarely used in higher education literature relating to learning. Furthermore, their usage within psychology and sociology is inconsistent. Here social structure is taken to mean ‘systems of human relationships among social positions’. Such a nexus of connections among [human actors] causally affecting their actions and in turn causally affected by them. The causal effects of the structure on individuals are manifested in certain structured interests, resources, powers, constraints and predicaments that are built into each position by the web of relationships. These comprise the material circumstances in which people must act and which motivate them to act in certain ways.

It is important to note Archer’s caveat with regard to structure and culture:

Structural and cultural factors influence agents only through shaping the situations in which they find themselves and distributing vested interests in maintenance and transformation to different groups. These compel no-one and are better constructed in terms of structure and culture supplying good reasons for various courses of action to those in given positions, than as hydraulic pressures. However, for this to be the case, a good reason requires a reflective agent to evaluate it as such, to adopt it, and to decide then what to do about it.

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58 Archer 2010, 274.
61 Maton 2004; Maton and Muller 2006; Young 2008.
63 Ashwin 2008.
64 Porpora 1997, 344, my emphasis.
65 Archer 1995, 249.
In addition to structure and agency, Jarvis argues that ‘learning is inextricably intertwined with culture and learning is always a cultural and social phenomenon. Indeed, culture is all that is learned by every individual’. Culture remains all the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values and emotions that we as human beings have added to our biological base, which we externalize as a result of our learning. Culture is a social phenomenon; it is what we as a society, or a people, share and which enables us to live as society… Learning, then, becomes necessary for the survival of societies and in the process, we as human beings, learn to be.

At the heart of Jarvis’s understanding of learning is ‘disjuncture’. This occurs ‘when we can no longer presume upon our world and act upon it in an almost unthinking manner’. When we face such disjuncture (‘an experience’) we can reject it, adapt it, or accept it – and this changes not only the person, but also society as well. This understanding of experience to Jarvis’s conception of learning must surely demand a realist understanding that the ‘experiencer is someone who encounters something that is prior to it, relatively autonomous from it, and causally efficacious upon it’. So understood, disjuncture resembles the experience of Archer’s situational logic of contradiction in the Cultural System (see below).

Archer’s distinctive understanding of culture is developed in ‘The myth of cultural integration’, and Culture and Agency. Of necessity the following summary is brief. Archer claims an analytic (not philosophical) duality in understanding culture:

Culture as a whole is taken to refer to all intelligibilia, that is to any item which has the dispositional capacity to be understood by anyone. Within this the CS [Cultural System] is distinguished as that sub-set of items to which the law of non-contradiction can be applied – that is propositions, for only statements which assert truth or falsity can be deemed to be in contradiction or to be consistent with one another. In turn this makes the propositional register equivalent to the CS at any given time …

Of course we do not live by propositions alone (any more than we live logically); in addition, we generate myths, are moved by mysteries, become rich
in symbolism and ruthless in manipulating hidden persuaders. But these are precisely the stuff of S-C [Socio-Cultural] interaction, for they are all matters of interpersonal influence.74

The S-C level includes ‘social stratification, and different ideal interests, such as ethnic, religious or linguistics divides (which are ideational but not propositional)’.75

Archer rejects the elision of meanings or ideas with those who hold them (maintaining the knowledge and knower distinction). This in turn serves to reject ‘the Myth of Cultural Integration’:76 the idea that culture is seamless, coherent, or consistent (for example, a coherent ‘culture of this university’, or a seamless ‘departmental culture’, or that of a single ‘South African’ or ‘Brazilian’ culture). The CS is characterized by logical agreement or disagreement that exists within the system (the degree of logical consensus), while the S-C is marked by ‘the degree of cultural uniformity [the degree of causal consensus] produced by the imposition of ideas by one set of people on another through the whole gamut of familiar techniques’.77 Archer illustrates this pertinently:

We utilize this concept every day when we say the ideas of X are consistent with those of Y, or that theory or belief A contradicts theory or belief B [Archer terms this logical consensus]. These are quite different from another kind of everyday statement, namely that the ideas of X were influenced by the ideas of Y, where we are talking about causal effects which are properties of people – such as the influences of teachers on pupils … or of earlier thinkers on later ones [termed causal consensus].78

Causal consensus (i.e. socio-cultural integration) is ‘intimately allied to the use of power and influence’.79

The conceptual gain offered by Archer’s analytical dualism lies in the ability to examine how differences or similarities between ideas (the CS, the degree of logical consensus) map onto (or perhaps more importantly, do not map onto) disagreements or alliances between people (the S-C, the degree of causal consensus). This holds insights for learning as it highlights the inevitable experience of the diverse student populations. As Archer explains:

It is maintained that to uphold ideas which are embroiled in a contradiction or enmeshed in complementarities places those who do so in different action contexts where they are confronted with different situational logics.80

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75 Archer 1996, xxii.
76 Archer 1996, xvii.
77 Archer 1996, xviii.
78 Archer 1996, xvii, my emphasis.
79 Archer 1996, xvii.
80 Archer 1996, xxii.
Using Archer’s analytical dualism to examine the cultural situational logics facing a student could produce insights into learning within diversity-laden higher education contexts. For example, at the most simplistic level where contradictions exist at the level of the SC (say, between creationism and evolution in the life-sciences), and as people become aware of these contradictions, they have to acknowledge that they face conflicting ideas. Such recognition demands (at the level of the S-C): (i) holding the conflicting ideas irrationally (creating other problems in managing conflicting ideas, for example in application); (ii) abandoning one or both of the ideas (‘losing one’s faith’ or dropping the course), or (iii) acting to ‘repair the inconsistency’, such as finding hermeneutical interpretations of creationist texts to permit a combining of ideas. The latter moves tend to cultural morphogenesis, where the former moves tend to morphostasis – although arguably should sufficient people abandon one of the conflicting contradictions, socio-cultural morphogenesis may well occur.

Where ideas are complementary the situation is unproblematic, and tends to reproduction and morphostasis of a CS. Crucially, while the CS presents us with an ideational context into which we are originally involuntarily placed, it is the quintessential reflective ability of human beings to fight back against their conditioning (not nullifying it for if nothing else it dictates language and topic), giving them the capacity to respond with originality to their present context.

For Archer’s conception of culture to be useful in engaging with the particular circumstances of higher education learning, a clearer understanding of who it is who ‘fights back against their conditioning’ will be required.

**Understanding agency**

Key to the utility of Archer’s work is her insistence that structure and agency, while irredeemably intertwined in action, are sui generis ‘different kinds of emergent entities’.

When I am discussing ‘structure’ or ‘culture’ in relation to ‘agency’ I am talking about a relationship between two aspects of social life. However intimately they are intertwined … these are none the less analytically distinct. Few would disagree with this characterization of social reality as Janus-faced: indeed too many have concluded too quickly that the task is therefore how to look at both faces of the same medallion at once. It is precisely this

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81 Archer 1996, xxii.
82 Archer 1996, xxvi.
83 Archer 2010, 275, original emphasis.
methodological notion of trying to peer at the two simultaneously which is resisted here. The basic reason for avoiding this is that the ‘parts’ and the ‘people’ are not co-existent through time and therefore any approach which amalgamates them wrongly forgoes the possibility of examining the interplay between them over time.84

Archer’s usage of agency is complex, but recognizes that as persons we have: ‘The properties and powers to monitor … [our] … own life, to mediate structural and cultural properties of society, and thus to contribute to societal reproduction or transformation’.85 The complexity arises from her insistence that ‘agent’ and ‘agency’ are always used in the plural: we are always ‘agents of something’. Defining agents as ‘collectivities sharing the same life-chances’, she argues that everyone is de facto an agent as to be an agent ‘is simply to occupy a position on society’s distribution of scarce resources’.86 This involuntary placement is characterized as our Primary Agency.

The next move in becoming social subjects entails the move to Corporate Agency (‘corporate’ used here as a participial adjective, forming an organized group). Here Primary Agents extend their influence on society beyond a mere aggregate impact, and through planned, strategic, joint action serve to elaborate society. Such groups can serve as ‘promotive interest groups, social movements and defensive associations’.87

Not all Primary Agents can or do become Corporate Agents, but this describes only the nature of their impact on societal elaboration, not whether that are intrinsically active or passive agents. Corporate Agents shape the context for all agents, although not always as anyone wants. Primary Agents live within this context, but their actions and responses to society’s changes, change the situation for Corporate Agents as well. These interactions lead themselves to the elaboration of both structure and agency itself, as the number of Corporate Agents increase and proliferate, and the number of Primary Agents decreases.88

Within the higher education context, for example, the university faculty (and arguably the management, support staff, professional associations, funders, academic disciplinary groups) shape the context the students as Primary Agents inhabit. However, if no more than simply through ‘a stream of environmental pressures and problems which affect the attainment’ of the goals of the Corporate Agents, students continually impact on the environ-

84 Archer 1996, xiv, original emphasis.
85 Archer 2004, 19.
86 Archer 2000, 261–2, original emphasis.
87 Archer 2000, 265.
88 Archer 2000.
ment forcing Corporate Agency to act to adapt its goals. This is clearer when students organize to change (through student councils, disability groups, protest action, and so on). The same can happen with regard to teaching through the vehicle of course evaluation and with the impact on disciplines as calls for interdisciplinarity gain momentum. In other words the utility of Archer’s framework for understanding learning lies also in its ability to explain contextual change over time.

Societal elaboration – change in the collectivities in which agents exist – impacts on the role array that are available for agents. Roles exist whether there are agents to occupy them or not (the role of lecturer exists whether there are students registered for the course or not, even if that may mean the position goes unfilled). For agents to become social actors they must personify a role for

social identity comes from adopting a role and personifying it in a singular manner, rather than simply animating it, [but] then it looks as though we have to call upon personal identity to account for who does the active personification.  

The question of identity thus becomes urgent: which comes first, social identity (in which case it appears as if Jarvis following Mead was correct), or personal identity? Archer’s response is that there is a temporal dialectic at work between the two, and that in the analysis of any event we begin with the temporally prior personal identity. To understand this it is necessary to consider how Archer may respond to Jarvis’s three questions.

A Social Realist Response to Jarvis’s Three Questions

Jarvis’s answer to the question of who it is that learns is that ‘it is the person that learns’.  But this assertion confronted him with the following three questions (also referred to above):

— When did the person become a self?
— When were the learners able to transcend their social surrounds and become agents?
— Were they always agents, or did agency emerge as a result of learning?

Not completely satisfied with his earlier answers following from Mead’s work (‘self’ emerging through social learning experiences stored and ordered

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89 Archer 2004, 18, original emphasis.
90 Jarvis 2006, 32.
in the mind), Jarvis attempts to extend Mead’s ‘self’ through attention to Archer’s Being Human.

Archer’s responses to Jarvis’s questions differ from those found in Mead, whose ‘self’ she regards as depending too much on the ‘generalized other’. A criticism that Jarvis acknowledges. Archer proposes a concept of the human person as stratified into ‘Persons, Agents and Actors’, in that order.

The properties and powers of the human being are neither seen as pre-given, nor as socially appropriated, but rather these are emergent from our relations with the environment. As such they have relative autonomy from biology and society alike, and causal powers to modify both of them. In fact, the stratified view of humanity advocated here sees human beings as constituted by a variety of strata. Each stratum is emergent from, but irreducible to, lower levels because all strata possess their own sui generis properties and powers. Thus, schematically, mind is emergent from neurological matter, consciousness from mind, selfhood from consciousness, personal identity from selfhood, and social agency from personal identity.

This process is not simply one-way. The person provides the ‘activity potential’ for the actor, and the agent serves to ‘supply activity with a purpose’. Both the agent and the actor depend on the person’s existence over time. Equally, the social roles personified by the actor impact on the collectivity of which the agent is a member, and both of these will over time impact on the personal identity of the person. While this is depicted as a linear process, one does not cease to be a person when one becomes an agent, and so on.

Archer’s understanding of personal properties and powers (PEPs) as emergent from relations with the environment (including the social) supports an understanding of life-long learning as ‘learning throughout the whole of the life cycle … in a sense learning is almost synonymous with consciousness’. The underlying concepts of emergence and relations resist a linear understanding of learning in which learning can be compartmentalized in phases or settings. Emergence presumes a temporal dimension that is not merely in the background, but forms part of the action itself. For example, such an understanding of the person permits recognition of life transitions (that are both personal and social) that are fundamental to the understanding of

91 Jarvis 2007, 35.
92 Archer 2000.
93 Archer 2000, 229 n. 20.
94 Archer 2006, 45.
95 Archer 1995, 255, original emphasis.
96 Archer 2000, 87, original emphasis.
97 Archer 1995, 256.
learning as life-long and life-wide. Consideration of the impact of life-stages on student learning receives scant attention in higher education literature on learning, with the notable exception of the work of William Perry and Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule.

While this gives some clue as to the way Archer would respond to Jarvis’s three questions arising from his recognition of structure and agency as central to understanding learning, more detail is required.

The emergence of ‘self’

Jarvis quotes Harré approvingly, describing ‘the self as the singularity we each feel ourselves to be, [which] is not an entity. Rather it is a site, a site from which a person perceives the world and a place from which to act’. However Jarvis stops short in his quotation. Harré goes on: ‘There are only persons. Selves are grammatical fictions, necessary characteristics of person-oriented discourses’. Under this description we must learn to be selves only in conversation, not practice, and self becomes a cultural phenomenon. Such a position fits uncomfortably with Jarvis’s own definition of learning, for it leaves no pre-linguistic ‘biography into which experience can be integrated’. Biography itself becomes a social gift.

Archer argues for a stratified view of the self: the sense of self and the concept of self. Our personal identity emerges from our sense of self (our awareness of our ‘persistence over time’). Crucially, for Archer the theory of self begins with our sense of self ‘in our embodied practices and environmental relations … Unless I learn very early on to draw a line between myself and the world, I am literally incapable of any practical action’. Self is ‘an emergent relational property whose realisation comes about through the necessary relations between embodied practice and the non-discursive environment’.

Significantly for attempts at social redress in higher education, Archer points to moral implications in accepting a socially derived self. A social derivation of selfhood commits … [Harré] … on his own admission, to the position where other groups have to struggle to articulate a moral/human status for the inarticulate. There can be no inalienable rights to human status where humanity itself is held to be a derivative social gift.
Archer does not discount society’s conversation, but rather argues that our sense of self emerges through our practical relations with the world, and originates pre-linguistically. This differs from our (socially acquired) concept of self (our self-worth) which is nonetheless dependent on our temporally prior sense of self.\textsuperscript{106}

Archer bases this on two arguments: the argument that our earliest encounters with the world are with ‘an undifferentiated environment of objects – including the human … Differentiation of the social only comes later’; and the argument from necessity.\textsuperscript{107} With regard to the first, our first learning emerges from practice: the subject–object and subject–subject distinction in which our first (however crude) theories of causation are formed.\textsuperscript{108} Practice then is the font of conceptualization and theory. Regarding necessity, she maintains that a sense of self must be distinct from social variations in concepts of selves, because society could not work without people who have a continuity of consciousness. Thus for anyone to appropriate social expectations, it is necessary for them to have a sense of self upon which these impinge, such that they recognize what is expected of them (otherwise obligations cannot be internalized).\textsuperscript{109}

A sense of self is fundamental to our identity in order to ‘secure the fact that the three orders of reality are all impinging on the same subject—who knows it’\textsuperscript{110}.

**Personal identity**

Archer distinguishes between our personal (PI) and social (SI) identities. PI is essentially ‘a matter of what we care about in the world. Constituted as we are, and the world being the way it is, humans ineluctably interact with the three different orders of reality, the natural, practical and social’.\textsuperscript{111} We are born into and must live and interact simultaneously with and in all three orders of reality: the natural, practical and social. Table 1 offers a necessarily concise overview of the three orders, and the primary concerns appropriate to each order from our relations with and in each order.\textsuperscript{112} Note these are neither three ‘types’ of reality, nor different ‘realities’.

\textsuperscript{106} Archer 2000, 125. 
\textsuperscript{107} Archer 2000, 125. 
\textsuperscript{108} Archer 2000, 151, following Piaget. 
\textsuperscript{109} Archer 2004, 13, original emphasis. 
\textsuperscript{110} Archer 2004, 15. 
\textsuperscript{111} Archer 2004, 15. 
\textsuperscript{112} See Archer 2000, 193–221.
Table 1: Relations in the three orders of reality\textsuperscript{113}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORDERS</th>
<th>CONCerns</th>
<th>EVALUATIVE IMPORTS</th>
<th>EMERGENCE FROM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural order</td>
<td>Physical well-being</td>
<td>Visceral</td>
<td>Body–environment relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical order</td>
<td>Performative achievement</td>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Subject–object relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discursive order</td>
<td>Self-worth</td>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>Subject–subject relations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is in this process of interacting with the three orders of reality that our emotions emerge. Emotions are ‘commentaries upon our concerns’ and are distinct from feelings.\textsuperscript{114} Archer rejects attempts to list and categorize every emotion as both impossible and unnecessary.\textsuperscript{115} She argues that her understanding is neither ‘emotional cognitivism’ nor ‘emotional irrationalism’\textsuperscript{116} but realist, grounded in the notion that reality constrains what we can successfully say about the world around us. Emotions serve as commentaries on our concerns and can modify a concern. Indeed ‘emotionality is our reflexive response to the world’.\textsuperscript{117}

We have to have concerns about our physical well-being, our relations with the physical, natural world. At the same time we also have to be concerned about our competence, for example in our working environment, and simultaneously with our relations on the social order: our relationships with others. The ‘balance we strike between our concerns [in each of these three orders simultaneously], and what precisely figures among an individual’s concerns is what gives us our strict identity as particular persons’.\textsuperscript{118} When we make decisions about our concerns, we do so under our own descriptions: they are fallible choices, but they are our choices.

Our identity (PI) is thus shaped ‘around what we care about and commit ourselves to’.\textsuperscript{119} The process through which we establish our way of planning and balancing our concerns within the unpredictable reality (natural, practical and social) in which we live, Archer terms ‘reflexivity’ (see below).\textsuperscript{120} Crucially ‘these concerns can never be exclusively social, and since the modus

\textsuperscript{113} Adapted from Archer 2000, 199.
\textsuperscript{114} Archer 2000, 198.
\textsuperscript{115} Archer 2000.
\textsuperscript{116} Archer 2000, 196.
\textsuperscript{117} Archer 2004, 16.
\textsuperscript{118} Archer 2000, 221, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{119} Archer 2000, 249.
\textsuperscript{120} Archer 2003, 16.

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vivendi is worked out by an active and reflective agent, personal identity cannot be the gift of society’.121

When we are confronted with the need to make decisions in any or all of these realms, our first recourse is to our experience in each of the realms – i.e. to our temporally prior PI. In this we need to be aware of

— how our interactions with the natural realm have influenced us (for example, if we know that we find cold unbearable, we must draw on that to make a decision about an Antarctic expedition);
— how we have developed experience in the practical realm (if we know we lack dexterity we may need to revise a dream of becoming a graphic artist), and
— our experiences (even second hand) in the social realm (we may find music wonderful, and have the skill to play, but observing the lifestyle of a touring musician may decide for us that this would be untenable).

Our choices are of course made under our own descriptions and are clouded by our human fallibility. Fallibility does not mean that we cannot make real decisions, with real consequences, and from these we experience Jarvis’s ‘disjunctures’ in which the world is not as we thought, that provide opportunities for learning.122

Archer’s assignment of a central role to emotion may serve to allay concerns such as those of Jenni Case, Delia Marshall and Cedric Linder123 that recent socio-cultural perspectives in learning, while extending our understanding beyond the phenomenographic frameworks to include culture and context, pay scant attention to the affective dimension of learning. The recognition of the importance of emotion finds support from the field of cognitive neuroscience.124 Directly linking neuroscience to educational contexts, Marye Immordino-Yang and Antonio Damasio express the hope that

while the idea that learning happens in a cultural context is far from new … these new insights from neurobiology, which shed light on the nested relationships between emotion, cognition, decision making, and social functioning, will provide a jumping-off point for new thinking on the role of emotion in education.125

121 Archer 2004, 16, original emphasis.
122 Jarvis 2006, 19.
125 Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2007, 9.
Social identity

The second analytic dimension of our identity is our social identity (SI). It is here that a response to Jarvis’s second and third questions emerges. Here the social agent becomes the social actor (respectively, temporally and analytically).

Social actors refer to the singular, the individual. ‘Actors … acquire their social identity in the way in which they personify the roles they choose to occupy’,\(^\text{126}\) recognizing that these choices are not made under circumstances of our choosing. The selection of available roles is neither unfettered nor static, as available roles are mediated through the collectivities to which we belong. Becoming an actor requires of us that we identify a role in which we ‘can invest … [ourselves] … such that the accompanying social identity is expressive of who … [we] … are as persons in society’.\(^\text{127}\) So becoming a student means occupying a role. How we choose (under our own descriptions) to personify that role is related to the choices we make between the imports of the three orders of reality – in other words, our personal identity.

Our SI is shaped by our ‘involuntary placement as *social agents* and how this affects the *social actors* whom some of us can voluntarily become’.\(^\text{128}\) Our SI follows temporally and analytically from our PI. Unlike our PI, our SI emerges only from relations in the social order.

Firstly PI ‘holds sway’ over our SI (PI \(\delta\) SI) because to make choices we need to fall back on our experience (on what we have learned) on making initial role choices.\(^\text{129}\) Secondly, the nascent SI impacts upon the nascent PI (SI \(\delta\) PI) – we experiment with personifying the role, and reflexively evaluate by attending to the emotional commentary on our concerns, our experience. This process impacts on our PI because we learn things about ourselves and about the role, and we objectively change because of that learning.\(^\text{130}\) Whether we successfully personify the role we choose (or that was foisted upon us, such as school pupil) or not, we then have to reflexively decide whether to stay (where there is a choice, weighing the opportunity costs of staying or leaving, changing or adapting). We also have to take the third step in the process, in which our PI and SI are in a dialectical relationship, or as Archer terms it, ‘the moment of synthesis between personal and social identity’ (PI

\(^{126}\) Archer 2000, 261.

\(^{127}\) Archer 2000, 261.

\(^{128}\) Archer 2000, 249, original emphasis.

\(^{129}\) Archer 2000, 289.

\(^{130}\) Archer 2000, 293.
Here we have to reflexively question how much of our selves we will invest in the role. We are nearly all simultaneous role-holders, especially by the time we are university students, and so ‘someone’ has to arbitrate and decide which role may claim what of our resources and ourselves. And here again, says Archer, it is the person, our PI, determined by our ultimate concerns, that makes the call.

The analytical applicability of Archer’s account of personal identity and emotional commentary to learning is evident even in its crudest dimensions: a cold, hungry and sleep-deprived person is unlikely to prioritize paying attention to the subtleties of developing competence in philosophical thought experiments. A student who has just come from a heated exchange with a lecturer in a core course is unlikely to be overly concerned with ‘deep learning’ in an ancillary course. A student whose early encounters with mathematics were negative may avoid courses with this requirement, even if this would be what they really wanted to do. More significantly, however, is in understanding how (in this case) students, at their stage in life, make choices across these domains. What are their concerns? What are the personal projects that sustain them (and that vivify the enablers and constraints of culture and structure, for only once a project is undertaken can culture and/or structure enable or constrain such a project)?

Reflexivity

At the core of the emergence of PI and (analytically, temporally, later) SI, and the related choices that bring about the emergence of the actor, is reflexivity. Archer defines reflexivity as ‘the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa’. Archer recognizes that such deliberations are fallible and always undertaken ‘under their own descriptions’. This process of reflexivity serves to ‘mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers plays in influencing social action’. Archer summarizes her model of the relationship between structure and agency/objective and subjective thus:

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131 Archer 2000, 293, original emphasis.
132 Archer 2000, 294.
133 Archer 2007, 4, original emphasis. Archer’s use of the term ‘normal people’ is contentious. I do not defend it, but merely note that in its context she is comparing people who may have lost their memory through disease or damage, with those who have a functioning memory that enables them to recognize themselves as being essentially the same person over time.
134 Archer 2007, 75, original emphasis.

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Table 2: Archer’s three-stage model\textsuperscript{135}

The three-stage model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Structural and cultural properties \textit{objectively} shape the situations that agents confront involuntarily, and \textit{inter alia} possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Subjects’ own constellations of concerns as \textit{subjectively} defined in relation to the three orders of natural reality: nature, practice and the social.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Courses of action are produced through the \textit{reflexive deliberations} of subjects who \textit{subjectively} determine their practical projects in relation to their \textit{objective} circumstances.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third stage is often ignored in sociology, and yet it is here that the ‘action’ is: ‘The final stage of mediation is indispensable because, without it, we have no explanatory purchase on what exactly agents do … [which leads to] … settling for empirical generalizations about “what most people do most of the time”’\textsuperscript{136}.

Reflexivity helps us understand three basic aspects of the way we ‘make our way through the world’\textsuperscript{137}.

1. Our PIs are unique, and originate in our particular ‘constellations of concerns’, making us ‘radically heterogeneous as subjects’ able to share the same agential collectivities and yet seek different ends, and willing to pay different opportunity costs;
2. Who we are is dynamic, and cannot be reduced to simply the psychological because we ‘modify our own goals in terms of their contextual feasibility’ under our own descriptions, always fallibly – and we have objective prices to pay when and if things go wrong;
3. We are (mostly) ‘active subjects’ because we can reflexively ‘adjust our practices to those practices we believe we can realize. Subjects regularly evaluate their social situations in the light of their personal concerns and assess their projects in the light of their situations’\textsuperscript{138}.

If, as Archer argues, ‘[s]ubjects regularly evaluate their social situations in the light of their personal concerns and assess their projects in the light of their situations’\textsuperscript{139}, then it is in this process of reflexivity that we may better come to understand why Basil Bernstein’s ‘acquirers’ ‘may or may not define the [pedagogic] relation as legitimate, or accept as otherwise,

\textsuperscript{135} Archer 2007, 17.
\textsuperscript{136} Archer 2007, 21.
\textsuperscript{137} Archer 2007, 22.
\textsuperscript{138} Archer 2007, 22.
\textsuperscript{139} Archer 2007, 22.
what is to be acquired’, or why students adopt a ‘surface approach’ to one course – however important – while committing the resources of deep engagement with another in an apparently arbitrary manner. Peter Khan uses Archer’s reflexivity and agency to show why top-down theories do not adequately account for disadvantaged students’ choices to attend university. Recognizing reflexivity also helps understand why big-picture explanatory theories such as the ‘digital divide’ don’t always hold true in explaining student use of information communications technology in supporting their learning.

Archer’s understanding of agency and reflexivity could extend the conceptualization of the ontological turn in higher education. In particular reflexivity, involving as it does not simply a cognitive exercise, but the whole person engaging with the world, permits a richer understanding than simple ‘reflective practice’. Archer locates praxis in reflexivity and agency:

> We cannot account for any outcome unless we understand the agent’s project in relation to her social context … [Then] … we cannot understand her project without entering into her reflexive deliberations about her personal concerns in conjunction with the objective social context she confronts.

### Making Our Way from Here

‘To deny agency’, as Hanan Alexander notes, ‘is to rob life of meaning and purpose; it is to view human existence as amoral, governed by arbitrary and mechanical natural forces, by fates beyond human comprehension, or by nothing at all’. Alexander argues that

> If it is not in fact within a person’s sphere of influence to direct her will, because it is controlled by some other agent such as society or history or chemistry or the gods, if she is not in this sense autonomous, then it is futile to endeavour to persuade her … since she is not the agent in charge of her desires or behaviour.

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140 Bernstein and Solomon 1999, 267.
141 Khan 2009.
142 Czerniewicz, Williams and Brown 2008.
143 For example, Barnett 2007.
144 Archer 2003, 131. See also Smith 2010. Christian Smith in What is a Person? also argues for a critical realist emergence of the human person, but does so in a way which leaves the relation between structure and agency uncertain. My attention was drawn to this text too late for consideration in this paper. See Sayer 2012.
I argued that Jarvis’s understanding of learning could extend discussions about learning in higher education. I expressed concern over Jarvis’s dependence for the emergence of the self on society, evident in his definition and work, notwithstanding his later recognition of Archer’s work.\textsuperscript{147} To provide an analytically and ontologically stronger basis for understanding the person who learns, I have suggested Archer’s social realism, and attempted to guide the reader through core ways in which her work could do this. A strong understanding of agency is central to all forms of learning, for

> the process of learning is shaped through interactions between social and individual contributions, yet with individuals playing a highly agentic role in those interactions. Moreover, this agency is not restricted to individual learning. It also shapes cultural change.\textsuperscript{148}

Growing from this I suggest a modification to Jarvis’s definition of learning that recognizes the agential impact of the student-as-actor on wider society:

Table 3: \textit{Proposed definition of learning}\textsuperscript{149}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modified definition (italicized text reflects changes)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>\textbullet\ … combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person experiences situations involving relations with one or any combination of three orders of reality (natural, practical and social), and the content of such experiences is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person, and impacting on the elaboration of society.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These changes emphasize the role of the student-as-actor who personifies the student role with their own biography and concerns. They learn through the disjuncture: ‘when we can no longer presume upon our world and act upon it in an almost unthinking manner’,\textsuperscript{150} when the situational logic in which we find ourselves is one of contradiction. Learning thus emerges from our relations with all three orders of reality: learning emerges through work, practice, on our part. Learning changes us as actors, which affects the group to which we belong as agents, and influences our identity as persons.

\textsuperscript{147} For example see Jarvis 2009.
\textsuperscript{148} Billett 2006, 58.
\textsuperscript{149} Jarvis 2009, 25.
\textsuperscript{150} Jarvis 2008, 5.
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