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WORKERS' EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION:  
A CRISIS OF IDENTITY?

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGING  
PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment with the  
requirements of Leeds Metropolitan University  
for the degree of Doctor of Education.

June 2013



## **Abstract**

This thesis uses the personal narratives of six long-serving former Tutor Organisers to explore the impact of the state's educational policy on the WEA and its special educational mission. Although this historic mission has changed many times since its creation in 1903, its core values still maintain a commitment to provide educational opportunities to those who need them most and through socially purposeful adult education, achieve, 'a better world, just, equal and democratic' (WEA, 2013a).

These rich biographical accounts - which span over 20 years - offer fascinating insights into the identities and practices of some of the WEA's key agents, and in doing so, they reveal much about the organisational identity itself, and how over time and under certain conditions, these identities have been subject to change. Using Archer's theory of human agency to analyse the narratives, a meta-narrative emerges to illustrate the importance of the structure/agency relationship between the WEA and its agents: a relationship which appears to have altered since the WEA's reorganisation in 2004.

Based on a critical realist approach which appreciates the formation of identity over a lengthy timeframe, the findings of this study reveal that the WEA's identity has always been a contested site of struggle, and subject to powerful internal and external influences that result in an organisation that is not so much in crisis, as in contradiction. The evidence also suggests that the recalibration of the Association's structure/agency relationship following the radical restructure of 2004 may be compromising its agents' practices and the WEA's distinctive identity.

## **Declaration**

I confirm that the thesis is my own work; and that all published or other sources of material consulted have been acknowledged in notes to the text or the bibliography.

I confirm that the thesis has not been submitted for a comparable academic award.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Richard Bolsin, the former General Secretary of the WEA for allowing me to access and interview the members of staff who participated in this study; Trish Hollies of the WEA for the initial introductions; the six former Tutor Organisers for their generosity of time, spirit and for furnishing me with their wonderful personal journeys. To all those in the wider Association who gave their time freely and willingly over the years to locate or provide me with sought after facts and figures, thank you.

I also wish to thank Mrs Sara Williams for her time and dedication in helping me transcribe the recorded interviews, Mr Julian Green for supplying the graphics and Mr Paul Hayes for his invaluable technical assistance. I would especially like to thank my supervisor:

Professor Sue Clegg for her guidance, encouragement and kindness throughout - and understanding and support shown by the staff at Leeds Metropolitan University which has enabled me to complete this research.

Finally, I wish to thank my partner Emma, for accompanying me on this journey and for her invaluable comments and unwavering support.

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## Introduction

In chapter one I outline the personal and academic rationales for undertaking this research. The personal rationale states my relationship to the Workers' Educational Association and why I value its mission and its distinctive educational methodology. These values reflect my own beliefs about the purpose and nature of education and are based on personal experiences as a working class student, and on my professional experiences gained from working with working class people in a variety of settings across the public, private and voluntary sectors. The relevance of class in my personal life, how it has shaped my own educational journey, and what I have learned as a result of continuing that journey, is then communicated through a reflexive account of specific childhood memories.

This is followed by current evidence and a brief overview of contemporary theorisations of class, which highlight its continued relevance in the UK today and the role it plays in reproducing and reinforcing inequalities. Despite years of targeted educational initiatives, especially under New Labour, little impact has been made on either the educational attainment of working class students or the inequalities gap; and a highly stratified secondary school system offering individualised pathways of learning (with increasingly sophisticated levels of pupil support) has arguably resulted in a more pernicious reproduction and reinforcement of those social and economic inequalities (Avis, 2008).

Thus, the central theme of my argument focuses on the need for a specific kind of adult educational praxis that not only has an alternative pedagogy, but which also includes a wider set of dynamic practices that actively reflect a deep, immovable commitment to global as well as local democracy, and social justice. What is more, these values must be tangible in the relations fostered between students and tutors and evident in its curricula, teaching materials and methods. This alternative will necessarily embrace the lived experience of students and work with them collectively in ways appropriate to building their knowledge and understanding, so that they will be empowered by their learning and

association to act upon issues of structural discrimination. For as Sargant et al. (1997) and Sargant and Aldridge (2002) argue, there is a need in the post-compulsory sector for something else, and not just simply more of the same.

It is my understanding that since its origins and up unto the present time, the Workers' Educational Association has been, and continues to be, an organisation that endeavours to offer an alternative: one that successfully engages adults in a broad range of learning opportunities - including informal, collective transformative education. Capturing a singular and stable definition however is problematic, and this is reflected in the literature as the underpinning philosophy and practices associated with adult education are informed by many disciplines and sub-disciplines. Further difficulty arises because of the essential dynamism of adult learning: a bespoke experience that is continuously shaped within a unique democratic framework, reflecting anew the motivations and abilities of those who participate in it. Precise locations of practice are equally challenging to pin down as a bewildering diversity of professionals (besides adult educators) make use of informal educational practices in fields not traditionally associated with political consciousness-raising – arguably an essential kernel of adult education. For these reasons, I refer to informal, collective, transformative education as 'socially purposeful education' or 'community education' as they too describe an alternative: the desire to educate people in order that they may live 'a good life'.

Therefore, it is the *telos* of informal, collective adult education that sets it apart from formal and non-formal education (which primarily rest on individual competencies and accreditation). However, both of these forms have in recent years shamelessly borrowed informal methods as a successful means of engaging a difficult, disinterested and alienated student body. Yet although informal, collective adult education has proved to be a suitable and relevant approach for disadvantaged adults and disengaged young people – and has in the recent past been used to advance social inclusion - it is in fact rare to experience it (Jowitt, 2007). This is because informal education, widely misunderstood and under-represented in adult education literature, (Marsick and Watkins, 1991; Foley, 1999; Foley,

2000) occupies a space outside of an accredited system that is geared to the attainment of individual qualifications in subjects thought to advance the position of UK plc.

The academic rationale for this thesis goes beyond my personal beliefs, experience and interests in informal education to pursue claims that this type of adult education is now under threat, and the WEA as a site of such practice is implicated in this. According to the WEA's hagiographer Mel Doyle, the drivers undermining the WEA - and thus informal adult education - are the neo-liberal discourses of quality assurance, public accountability and economic competitiveness (2003, p.86). These appear neutral, but implicitly carry instrumental concepts of what constitutes 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson, 1979). After introducing the critical realist analytical framework I deploy in the analysis to investigate such claims, I locate the precise nature of this threat to see if the forces which shape education today do indeed present such a challenge.

As this study reveals, the scientific objectivism of these discourses infuses policy, and is discernible in the linked processes of the state's funding mechanism and its quality assurance approach. This approach not only promotes practices in education that are either quantifiable or of obvious economic value, but also actively thwarts models of engagement and participation in education. This 'audit culture' necessarily embraces the practices of performance management, radically altering the structures that inform and support educational praxis and even professional praxis itself. This results in the objectification, simplification and standardisation of a process that is typically unpredictable and messy. It transforms the once equitable relationship between teacher and student into a transaction between 'provider' and 'client' where learning – refashioned into a new, neat, linear form - becomes the 'product' and carries such uninformative descriptors as 'hard' or 'soft' outcomes. Turning away from holistic, interdisciplinary forms of learning - and ignoring potential and incidental learning - educators focus instead on delivering and promoting selective components of knowledge that are more easily measured and that will most likely satisfy the inspectorate and secure future funding.

Compartmentalising knowledge in this way provides a transparent logic for public accountability as it is easier to evidence. However, when an auditor's perspective is embedded into learning, Mulderrig (2003) believes a fundamental change occurs, reifying the activity and emasculating the actors involved in it; replacing knowledge generated through critical thinking and active problem-solving with proscribed teaching methods and standardised, generic curricula. In turn, substantive standardisation facilitates the possibility of mass testing based on individual competency, accelerating the use of aptitude tests designed to measure student recall, and ultimately altering the intrinsic value of learning to the extrinsic objectives of passing tests and acquiring individual accreditation or qualifications. As content-based systems standardise all aspects of education, new qualifications proliferate and more students are able to enter the system. This necessitates larger, bureaucratic, administrative machines such as the National Qualifications Framework - which besides dealing with equivalence and quality standards - further expands the commodification of education and extends its reach into global markets, trading in both courses and students.

The processes of commodification and marketisation of education are performative, (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) where one process (commodification) assists the perpetuation of the other (marketisation) and vice-versa, resulting in qualifications. The symbolic representations of knowledge and skills become more valuable as *trading commodities* than the knowledge itself. Alienation, another performative consequence of commodifying education, also occurs when the exploitative process of objectifying a relational service into a series of fragmented stand-alone programmes for profit, de-contextualises and generalises the subject matter, distancing the tutors and students vis-à-vis their relationship to the content. Further alienation is also experienced as the prescriptive teaching practices that accompany standardised curricula, deter a more active engagement with knowledge production. Mass marketisation of education further escalates alienation for both learning and teaching, as the contradictory discourses of 'choice' and 'widening participation' draw a greater number of students away from collective teaching and learning experiences into new individualised pathways of learning.

This results in the demise of the student cohort and teaching collegiate and the rise of remote instruction via learning platforms, software designed for individual use; and as Jarvis has noted, an increase in the modularisation of learning (1993, pp.65-66).

Structural alienation of this kind saturates efforts to teach and learn authentically; to build knowledge collectively, or actively re-create knowledge by critically reflecting on lived experiences as the physical spaces in which these activities might take place (under the guidance of those skilled in such approaches) are being squeezed, eradicated or simply not factored in anymore at the planning stages. As places of learning are built to satisfy individual tastes, the potential of students to learn through association becomes limited, and with it the experience of learning using one's own embodied knowledge and that shared by fellow students. Generating meaning from the specific to the generalizable, or put another way: from the personal to the political, becomes obsolete. Commodification, marketisation and the individualisation of learning are forces which are directing students and teachers to become passive consumers of knowledge instead of being active creators, moving them away from a model of education that collectively develops understanding, ability and critical thinking skills using local issues towards a model where teachers transfer and students 'bank' bits of alienated knowledge.

These influences are part of an exclusive neo-liberal agenda that is transforming what was once a local public service into a global business, estranging students and teachers from 'really useful knowledge' and its relationship with the issues of democracy and injustice, which left unchallenged, will ubiquitously reinforce its own values wherever it takes hold through the reproduction of its systems. The reorganisation of the UK's Further Education colleges in the 90's is a good illustrative example of this, with its older function of meeting local need replaced with a profitable focus on providing services to business and educational opportunities for paying foreign students. These forces now pervade all sectors of education, including independent voluntary organisations such as the WEA, and are putting pressure on those very structures that support the kind of

educational agency that lies beyond the tightly construed boundaries of neo-liberal instrumentalism.

However, it is not only external pressures that threaten the philosophy and practices of the WEA but internal vulnerabilities too; the widening divisions between its former Branches and Districts; the long-standing and unresolved problem about how to revive its flagging voluntary movement; as well as the well-documented and on-going professional conflicts as to what constitutes 'really useful knowledge'. All of these issues, which could be interpreted as organisational 'fault-lines' arising from the WEA's tripartite origins, have pulled the Association in different directions throughout its long history, a situation that remained largely unchanged as the new millennium approached. Prior to inspection, the WEA had still not effectively reconciled these long-standing internal issues which, alongside a series of financial and managerial crises that hit the WEA in the late 90's, divided its membership, throwing the organisation into turmoil.

Unsurprisingly, the Adult Learning Inspectorate failed the WEA in 2004. The combination of this failed inspection and internal crises - as well as the challenging external pressures that were reshaping the education sector generally - arguably forced the dramatic WEA re-structure of 2004. Although having undertaken a number of internal reorganisations before and since 2004, this restructure stands out as particularly significant because it was brought about by external forces that swept away the Association's original and autonomous Branch and District structure and ended the historic role of the Tutor Organiser, replacing it with the Regional Educational Manager. These developments represented not only a relocation of power but a weakening of power; up until 2004 Tutor Organisers were at the heart of WEA: key agents who shouldered the primary responsibility for breathing life into the voluntary movement and the organisational mission.

With this in mind, I thought that directing the research on former Tutor Organisers might be insightful: their unusually lengthy careers in adult education - and more specifically in

the WEA - would provide a useful analytical opportunity to explore whether the WEA identity is indeed under threat. Working within a critical realist framework, I used Archer's morphogenetic approach to investigate this; her theory about the acquisition of identity is particularly informative for this study presenting a unique opportunity to find out if, after its reorganisation in 2004, the WEA has changed its identity by changing the spaces in which informal, collective, transformative education used to take place. The strengths of Archer's theory lie in its analytical dualism: allowing a sophisticated, multi-layered appreciation of identity formation and development; questioning the notion that identities (whether individual or organisational) are fixed and result from dominant environmental or biological forces, or as in the case of organisations, are the singular products of human will.

This approach illustrates the formation and re-formation of identity as a cycle, with all the attendant complexities being played out over time between the potential properties of structure, culture and people, enabling a more realistic understanding of how what appears to be a fixed or robust identity may radically alter. In linking the role of the individual with that of the organisational in a dynamic, dialectical relationship, Archer offers a promising theory for analysing the complex, highly reflexive personal narratives of former WEA Tutor Organisers which span more than twenty years, shedding light on their sometimes seemingly contradictory forms of agency (with themselves and each other) in shaping the WEA's identity.

Looking at the WEA in this way departs from all previous commentary on the Association's identity, which has invariably come from former members or associates of the WEA who have traditionally focussed the debate on whether the Association can truly claim to be a working class organisation, or whether its adult curriculum adequately addresses the concept of 'really useful knowledge'. The methodology used in this study expands the critical lens beyond the binary terms of either/or, deploying instead a critical realist appraisal of the forces which shape the processes of identity, and in doing so illustrates the reclamation of human agency and its centrality to the WEA and the realisation of its mission.

## Organisation of Thesis

This thesis is organised into seven chapters that include a short summary, a select bibliography and appendices. **Chapter One** sets out the personal and academic rationales for undertaking this research; I use my own story to highlight some of the experiences that have shaped my personal perspective on education, and which underpin the central argument of this thesis. Following the logic of Bourdieu, I concur that, as the function of dominant educational discourse is to reproduce, rather than address structural and social inequalities, an alternative emancipatory pedagogy is needed. However, the pervasive expansion of instrumental education is threatening the existence of such alternatives, as under the banner of improving standards, organisations are forcibly restructured to meet the needs of the labour market.

**Chapter Two** charts a changing educational climate from the mid-1970's to the Noughties, and drawing on the policies and socio-political events of the time, I illustrate the intellectual and political distance travelled over the last 40 years, a period in which all of the research participants were active as WEA Tutor Organisers. In doing so, I reveal how the WEA has moved from a position of state endorsed expansion to deliver the broad educational priorities of the Russell Report (1973), to become a quasi-marketised provider that is driven by the much narrower recommendations of the Leitch Report (2005).

**Chapter Three** presents a critical history of the Association and explores some persistent internal tensions which have impacted upon the WEA's identity and the interpretation of its mission. These recurrent tensions have caused the WEA to periodically suffer a crisis of identity; the Association's attempts to simultaneously keep pace with modernity, satisfy the demands of state policy, and maintain a vision of the WEA true to its founding father Albert Mansbridge, have arguably escalated rather than resolved the crisis. In uncovering some of the historic complexities that have informed the WEA's development, this chapter also reveals a less benevolent aspect to the WEA's identity, inviting a re-appraisal of the WEA's position in the history of working class adult education.

**Chapter Four** introduces and details the methodological framework chosen for this qualitative enquiry and the methods I used to gather, organise, handle and interpret the data.

**Chapter Five** presents two very different voices of the WEA, and referring to these contrasting narratives in some detail, I use Archer's morphogenetic approach to illustrate how the individual agency of the six Tutor Organisers emerged and the role the WEA played in this, highlighting the complex symbiotic relationship that exists between structure and agency.

**Chapter Six** considers the remaining narratives and uses the rest of the cohort as 'expert witnesses' who, despite giving very different personal readings of the challenges they faced, achieve remarkable consensus with a set of commonly identified themes, giving credence to assumptions made elsewhere in this thesis about the impact of a changing educational climate on adult education in the UK.

**Chapter Seven** presents the findings of, and conclusion to this enquiry, offering some thoughts about the implications of this research for the WEA today. I also provide considerations for future research that would make interesting and useful contributions to the field.

This research contributes to adult education theory and in particular to the neglected and largely misunderstood field of informal education. It also informs the continuing debate about the principles and practices of the adult educator who works with those most disadvantaged in society and will therefore be relevant to those working in the fields of social work, youth and community work, community education and continuing adult education. More specifically, it is hoped that the findings of this research will be of direct interest and use to the WEA today, offering as it does, a rather unique opportunity for the Association to explore the efficacy of its structures vis-a-vis attracting and nurturing agents who are capable of delivering its vision.

## Chapter One: The Rationale for this Study

I have never been a worker or student with the Workers' Educational Association. My first contact with the organisation was in 2003 when I worked as a Skills for Life Co-ordinator for local and regional adult education providers. In this role, I met and worked with a WEA Tutor Organiser for the first time and indirectly learned a little about the organisation that was first established in 1903 to, "Promote the higher education of working men" (Doyle, 2003, p.6), but which today, through adult education, has a vision for, "A better world, equal, democratic and just" (WEA, 2013). As Mel Doyle, author and WEA hagiographer illustrates in the WEA's centenary publication: 'A Very Special Adventure' (2003), the WEA has had to continuously renegotiate its boundaries of practice in response to an ever changing set of influences, prompting the Association to periodically review and update its core values as expressed in its historic mission.

From this publication and select internal WEA literature, I have come to understand some defining characteristics about the WEA identity, what values shape its practices and to what ends. In short, I understand the WEA to be an international federation whose organisational objects communicate the values of education as a universal right, and that the purpose of education should be to address global issues of social justice with a special commitment to the most vulnerable in society. A further founding principle of the WEA is its democratic relationship with its voluntary members who are actively encouraged to exercise control, especially over the learning process (Doyle, 2003, pp.83-86). Thus, the purpose of WEA education is still very much in tune with what it always professed to be, which was to achieve a 'tolerable' society through the actions and involvement of its members (Tawney, 1931, p.197).

I am inspired by this concept of education, yet it stands in stark contrast to my own experiences of modern state education in the UK which focuses on individual rather than collective goals; values the competitive practices of tests and examinations rather than collaborative, problem-solving approaches that foster the shared discovery of

knowledge; and that advances and rewards those differently who are able to evidence competency in selective, abstract forms of knowledge compared with embodied or experiential kinds. Such an orientation in education has implications for knowledge: how it is defined and valued, how it is taught and evidenced, as well as to what purpose it serves. These beliefs about the purpose of education shape educational praxis, and so predictably, the values underpinning the professional practices of the state system and the WEA diverge, because according to Doyle, the Association professes, "A deeply held belief in the value of students and tutors working together through the practical democracy of the 'negotiated' curriculum" where, "A true understanding of the WEA's curriculum can only be appreciated if it is acknowledged that 'subject' and 'student' cannot be separated" (Doyle, 2003, p.86).

This suggests the WEA organisational structure is flexible, allowing tutors to engage with students to negotiate the learning, the substance and style of which is then fashioned specifically to meet their needs. This alternative form of adult learning - or andragogy as it was known - was made popular by Knowles and practiced widely by adult educators in the 70's. It offered a different approach from schooling or pedagogy, believing the life experiences of adults useful in both informing the curriculum and motivating greater participation in learning (Jarvis, 1987, pp.174-177). Indeed, I have experienced this myself as an adult learner when, prior to university, I spent a year in West Germany attempting to learn the language, but despite my best class efforts I made very little progress. It wasn't until I acquired a circle of friends that the real break-through came as learning in context, and having to learn in order to understand and be understood – in an environment that was not pressured or threatening - rapidly escalated my abilities. So great was my improvement, at the end of that year I returned to the UK to study for a degree in German and not Philosophy, Politics and Economics as I had originally intended!

This change in direction was largely due to the level of professorial autonomy in such matters, but also the flexibility of a higher education system that acknowledged and accepted its agents' professional opinion, which on the basis of an informal conversational

interview and in place of formal subject qualifications, allowed me to study German at an advanced level. Whilst at university, new and unique opportunities opened up for me to teach languages in settings that allowed me to borrow heavily from andragogy and what I now recognise as informal education: when I taught English as a foreign language at evening school in the former German Democratic Republic; or when I volunteered for the Commission for Racial Equality Service as a home tutor, teaching English as a second language to families settling in Britain from overseas.

On and off for the past twenty years, I have taught and been a facilitator of learning: with children and adults in their homes, at clubs, on the streets, in schools, at college, as well as in the workplace. It is clear to me that my experience of informal education is at odds with my experiences of formal state education, as it focuses not on readymade learning materials, or on the achievement of specific learning goals or a qualification, but on beginning - and hopefully continuing - a meaningful dialogue with people who will, along with the tutor, share their lives and knowledge for the purpose of enriching the lives of those engaging in it.

Arising from personal and professional experiences of formal and informal education, I have come to realise how crucial it is for adult working class students to have access to an informal pedagogy which addresses their emotional needs and goes beyond the economic imperative of social mobility. This alternative is vital for two reasons: firstly, so that adults, regardless of their class, gender, age or ability may engage in 'second chance' education to address the effects of institutional discrimination and fulfil their potential, and secondly, so that people are given an opportunity to recognise, acknowledge and experience a much older tradition in education – a tradition in which education has a moral purpose - which invites all to share in 'a common life' (Dewey, 1916, p.9). This collective and transformative vision of education is what I believe differentiates the informal from the formal and instrumental kind, and although teachers in this sector have in recent years increasingly used its populist methods as a means of engaging students, it

is the commitment to egalitarian principles of practice and the steadfast belief that education has a social purpose that defines it as such.

By contrast, the purpose of formal state education is not to, "Liberate but invade and dominate" those who have a different experience and view of the world, forcing working class students to retreat into a, 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1972a) where teachers, "[Issue] communiqués and [make] deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (Freire, 1970, p.58). Education of this sort can neither offer relevant transformational learning opportunities, nor address the emotional needs that have arisen from class discrimination because as Bourdieu and Passeron argue, it,

"[R]eproduces the dominant culture, contributing thereby to the reproduction of the structure of power relationships with a social formation in which the dominant system of education tends to secure a monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p6).

Government social inclusion initiatives that target the symptoms of structural discrimination, such as widening participation, have failed too, because rather than use an alternative pedagogy, they offer yet more of the same (Sargant et al, 1997; Sargant and Aldridge, 2002; Taylor, 2007). A study conducted by NIACE in 1997 reported that 81% of adults interviewed had not participated in any learning since leaving school and what is more, were unlikely to participate in learning in the future (Sargant and Field, 1997). Furthermore, in 2004 NIACE found that, "The total of adults reporting that they are currently learning (19%) was the lowest of any year since 1996" (Taylor, 2007, p.12).

Despite my eventual success in the formal education system, I often reflect on my learning journey and the many difficulties I encountered because of my class and gender, and so in keeping with the narrative methodology used in this research, I offer my own story of selective formative memories that I consider to have shaped my identity and my attitude to informal, collective, transformative learning or socially purposeful education.

## **My Story 1973-1984**

With hindsight, I believe my local infant and junior school to have been quite progressive in its pedagogy as collective learning and play featured quite strongly. Reading and literature were genuinely valued as the day always began with a pupil reading a passage from the Bible in assembly, and often ended in our classrooms with everyone gathered to listen expectantly to a story. Friday afternoons were my particular favourite because Mr Griffiths, my class teacher, who had a deep and sonorous Welsh accent, would read animatedly to the whole class from a fantastic selection of children's tales that captured our imaginations and certainly inspired me to wander off to the library to take home a book or two.

Yet, my other recollections of primary school evoke less fond memories of the countless number of times I got into trouble, was smacked, had to write lines, visit the headmaster, or copy the hymns whilst kneeling on a cold parquet floor in the main hall. I can't remember what I did, but clearly something was not right. Perhaps, upon reflection, my primary school was one of those that 'added value' and the main thrust of its educational efforts were of a compensatory kind to either offer what was not available in the family home - such as books or educational games - or offset the negative effects of what was happening in a lot of poor households which turned out unsettled, fearful and unconfident children that were emotionally not 'class ready'.

In 1979 I went to the local 'comp' on the basis that my older siblings were there who could 'look after' me if there was any trouble. 'Big' school was a brutal and brutalising experience, where the majority of teachers enforced an authoritarian rule of law in the hope of ensuring some basic form of crowd control over a largely dysfunctional and disinterested pupil body. Student teachers, teachers perceived as 'weak' and teachers of unpopular subjects such as languages or religious education, were routinely considered as 'sport' by many pupils who sabotaged almost every effort to be educated. A brief but illustrative example, which we all thought amusing at the time, was when a boy in our class heated up a metal ruler under his desk with a cigarette lighter before asking our kind

hearted R.E teacher to pass it to another pupil. If I relate such stories now I am often asked if I attended a special institution, I didn't. My school was an ordinary inner city comprehensive, not too far from the infamous landmark 'Spaghetti Junction' and it drew its 1800 pupils from the local community, which was a diverse mix of working class English, Irish, Afro-Caribbeans, Indians and Pakistanis.

My secondary school years fell between the years 1979 – 1984, a time in which Britain experienced severe economic and social decline with over 3 million unemployed. As Birmingham had built its entire existence upon manual trades that had emerged from the Industrial Revolution, the recession hit the city hard and working class families had a tough time in finding work and providing for their children, who, if they were anything like us, were glad to be in school, away from the turbulence and stress of family life. When the building trade collapsed in the early 80's my father, a roofer, became long term unemployed, leaving it up to my mother to find work and provide for the family. To her credit she did this, but it was difficult as my mother had left the local Catholic Abbey at fourteen unable to read and write, which of course limited her to manual low paid jobs with poor terms and conditions. As teenagers, we watched all of our adult relatives lose their jobs as well as the opportunities to find alternatives, but at least there were some saving graces in that no-one lost their house or had to sell their car – though this was largely because no-one we knew owned such things!

Education in this context was understood as a way to mark time till it was time to leave school and 'get a trade', as we were expected to by our teachers and parents. Up until the mass unemployment of the 80's this had been achieved through apprenticeships or on the job training, but the changing economic climate had narrowed our options to either Youth Training Schemes, with no prospect of real employment and a living wage, or full-time further education. The latter was only a theoretical option for most of us, a fact publicly acknowledged by the Deputy Head of my school in 1984 when during the school leavers' assembly, he chose to forgo making one of his own poignant speeches to play a UB40 song instead. The song he opted for was 'One in Ten': the lyrics of which describe the desperate

circumstances of inner city life for those 'signing on' for unemployment benefit at that time, his rather funky way of communicating what would turn out to be the immediate future for the class of 1984.

Even though these were tough times for many people in the UK, disadvantage seemed to hit selectively, making things much more difficult if you were working class, and then even more so if you were female, but what if you were black? Growing up in Birmingham in the 70's and 80's meant that this issue could not be avoided, and indeed at the age of six or seven I was confronted with the first of many difficult personal experiences which definitively influenced and shaped my attitudes on the matter. Against the prejudices of my family, I chose to have black friends and grew in confidence to challenge personal encounters of direct racism whenever it arose. Institutional racism, however, I found much harder to grasp, but looking back it clearly existed and today as a working professional I fully appreciate what Trevor Philips calls the 'snow-capped mountain' phenomenon: where the higher you climb in a professional arena, the colder and whiter it gets (Esmail, A, 2005). Although this comment was originally aimed at the NHS, I find this analogy holds true for many other professional occupations, as well as my own experience of making my educational ascent as not one of my co-students were black Britons.

The force of such systematic violence in the form of institutional racism really only hit me a few years ago when, in a training exercise, I was asked to think back to when I was a child. It felt like a lifetime ago and in some respects it felt like I was thinking about a different person, but as I thought about the distance I had travelled, I began to think about the kinds of journeys my old school friends had made, and I wondered, on the basis of my struggle with the barriers of class and gender that I had had to overcome, how much more impossible theirs would have been because of their colour. What has happened to their dreams?

## What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
Like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore-  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over-  
Like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags  
Like a heavy load.  
Or does it explode?

(Langston Hughes, 1986, Selected Poems).

One might argue that the world has changed considerably since I grew up and that race or class no longer shape people's lives and futures in the same manner as it did mine.

Major's 'classless society' - followed by Blair's 'Third way' - is perhaps an acknowledgement of the sociological theorists' claims of the 90's, who announced that traditional concepts of class were no longer relevant in modern post-industrial western societies (Giddens, 2000). Alternatively, it could be interpreted as the convergence of the political Left and Right which now universally accept the neo-liberalism of market welfarism, individualising the consequences of class and race and thereby masking its structural causes (Taylor, 2007; Willmott, 2007). Yet Skeggs asks why so much, "Energy, anxiety and aggressive denial is put into proving that the working-class either does not exist or, if it does, is worthless" when it is in fact ubiquitous (2004, p.173). In response to these political and philosophical trends which have downplayed the importance of class, Skeggs argues,

"We need to reinvigorate class analysis and deal with the contemporary shifts in neo-liberal governance and translational flexible capitalism. We require an understanding that goes beyond the 'economic' and exchange to understand the consequences of cultural struggle and how this is part of new marketisation, new attributions of value, new forms of appropriation,

exploitation and governance, and new selves. We must rethink contemporary class struggle and focus on the relationships of entitlement to the cultures and affects of others. This perspective enables us to see where, how and why working class culture becomes fixed, but plundered: elements for others to use and morally authorise themselves" (Skeggs, 2004, p.186).

Skeggs believes that just as power and privilege are ascribed, so too are the values and 'essential characteristics' associated with being working class, perspectives ascribed by the powerful which are communicated via economics, culture and mobility, to fix and misrepresent that class (2004, p.4). Through the hidden processes of moral inscription, exchange, evaluation and perspective, a knowledge-position on an issue, persons, or interaction can be taken and used as a technique to put forward the interests of some people and exclude/devalue others (ibid, p.6).

These perspectives are subjective moral assertions of one's worth that breach the economic boundaries of class, propertising the cultural and personal for their own interest. Building on the work of Bourdieu (1987) and Waquant (1991), Skeggs argues that institutionalised perspectives are forms of inscription that are performative, and bring about the perspective of the classifier in two ways: a) to confirm the perspective of the classifier and b) to capture the classified within discourse (2004, p.18). Sociological categorisations of class - for example those used by the Registrar General (which are essentially based upon occupation and income) - are an illustrative example of this and have provoked much criticism from respondents for the annual British Social Attitudes Survey (2007) for being overly simplistic and reductive. Skeggs would no doubt agree, and so drawing on the works of Day (2001), Poovey (1995), McClintock (1995) and Finch (1993), her theorisations about class lead her to conclude that: firstly, class is always closely entwined with different forms of exchange; secondly, it is always and intimately connected to the concept of self; thirdly, it can only be known through other categorisations; fourthly, it always embeds the interests of the theorist in the perspective taken on it and fifthly, it always has a moral value (Skeggs, 2004, p.27).

Rather than counting or measuring classes to see how people fit into classificatory systems, or attempting to refine them in line with the Registrar General's categorisations of class, we should, according to Skeggs, be asking instead why such classifications exist in the first place and in whose interests these particular ways of understanding class continue to exist or not? (Skeggs, 2004, pp.4-5). So, is class relevant for post-industrial societies today? According to the respondents of the annual survey of British Social Attitudes (2007), class is still very relevant because a staggering 57% of us consider ourselves to be working class. What is more, many of the survey's respondents considered the defining characteristic of class to be whether they had to go to work or not, in order to make a living. Besides economic factors, education, language and culture were also cited as markers of class, supporting Skeggs' theory that, "Class, is spoken euphemistically, in ways that do not directly name it or ignore it but, nonetheless, represent a classed perspective" (2004, p.44).

If so, our understanding of class is dependent upon where and how we are positioned in the classification schema, and as Bourdieu notes, knowledge in particular is always a matter of positioning (1988). Education is a prime example where middle class habitus defines what is *valuable* knowledge (Bourdieu, 1984, p.66ff), framing too the methods that are 'acceptable' ways of knowing and measuring knowledge (Skeggs, 2004, p.54). This in turn results in a construct where the majority of working class students have either been excluded, fared poorly or been failed. Statistical evidence affirms this, showing that middle class children do not only achieve more from education than their working class counterparts at GCSE level (NSO: 2002), but, "Go on gaining more of it [education] and more from it throughout their lives" (Bynner and Parsons, 1997, cited in Coffield, 2001, p.9). Of those working class students who have successfully gone on to Higher Education, the majority have been young, full-time, female students, taking *vocational* subjects at less prestigious universities (Bekhradnia, 2003; Taylor, 2007, p.6).

Thus as Avis writes,

"[T]he relationship between class and educational achievement remains in place, with those drawn from the higher social classes overachieving and being more likely to attend prestigious universities" (Avis, 2007, p8).

Building on both Avis (2007) and Bekhradnia (2003), Wheelahan (2010) believes that, at the heart of the matter, the access of working class students in education, "Is not solely determined by *absence* from higher education," but that it is also, "Determined by the *type* of participation within tertiary education" (p.162), and more specifically their exclusion from curricula that offer 'powerful knowledge'. Her argument rests on Bernsteinian concepts of 'sacred' and 'mundane' knowledge (Bernstein, 2000, p.157), which suggests that powerful knowledge is represented in the academic disciplines, and access to it is vital if we want to be able to think the 'unthinkable' or know the 'not-yet-thought'. According to Bernstein (ibid), it is the abstract, conceptual forms of knowledge, rather than the 'other ways of knowing' such as competency based training, that will offer students the opportunity to do this, and as Wheelahan argues, open up the possibility of questioning the, "Eternal truths dispensed by those in authority" (2010, p.162); arguably the basis for any radical and transformative pedagogy.

This social realist argument is based on the understanding that knowledge is a social product, "Marked by the conditions under which it was produced" (ibid), and is therefore commensurate with Freire's emancipatory concept of knowledge that underpins informal, transformative pedagogies. Furthermore, it also complements Skeggs' reconceptualisation of class and Bourdieu's theory of class reproduction, which combined, forms a convincing rationale for providing working class people with better and increased access to critical liberal education. Unfortunately, as Taylor points out, "There is no or little interest by Government in enabling more and different learners to have access to a critical and liberal education" (2007, p.13).

Yet this is important to pursue for social reasons because, despite diversifying access routes into education and providing opportunities to learn other forms of valuable knowledge, the picture of disadvantage in the UK has not altered. Thus, leading to the conclusion that education is no longer, "The vehicle for securing greater social equity" (Field, 2006, p.101). In an educational climate that has relentlessly advanced the skills agenda at the expense of a broader based curriculum offer, Wheelahan's call to put knowledge at the centre of the vocational curriculum might at least provide a much needed (but limited) avenue for educators to, "Consider the way in which these students may be provided with access" to powerful knowledge (2010, p.162).

New Labour's electoral promise to put education at the heart of its policies, not only consolidated the Conservative's traditional focus on basic skills and vocational training, but additionally set in place, "Structural and ideological transformations that align[ed] education more closely with its economic function" (Mulderrig, 2003). The impact of such policies on informal, socially purposeful adult education is unequivocally summed up in Taylor's critique of New Labour policy as he writes,

"This perspective omits any recognition that there is a need to enable more and difficult learners to have access to a liberal and critical education; nor does it allow any collective or community notion of education – it assumes an entirely individualistic (and marketised) frame of reference" (Taylor, 2007, pp.6-7).

## **Academic Rationale**

The personal rationale for a transformative educational agenda argues the case that the new twist on widening participation and inclusion has failed to emancipate the working class student, and that any real hope for social democratic change that might have existed, withered under New Labour, as they chose to prioritise an, "Increasing number of learners into the existing free-market culture" to promote a skills agenda for economic productivity (Taylor, 2007; Coffield, et al., 2005). This situation that has not been reversed in any way under the present Conservative/ Liberal Democrat Coalition. Thus, the spaces

where an alternative adult pedagogy were once practiced are being squeezed out by a narrowly conceived education policy that, according to Mayo and Thompson, will prove, "Ineffective in realising the full potential of people in society" (1995, p.198), because rather than address the issues of social cohesion, it is oriented to providing an adequately trained labour force instead (Mulderigg, 2003). Hase and Kenyon (2000) go even further to suggest that because of this narrow focus we are now struggling for democracy itself as,

"[E]conomic competitiveness and rationalism places the individual in a corporate environment in which a person is striving for at worst, power and personal gain and at best continued survival" (Hase and Kenyon, 2000).

The purpose of this academic rationale therefore, is to fully introduce the drivers behind the policies that are changing the educational landscape and which also appear to threaten the practices of, "All those adult educators who believe that 'really useful knowledge' must necessarily include the development of critical intelligence and political consciousness-raising" (Thompson, 1993). As the WEA has been associated with this educational tradition since its very origins - and claims to do so today with its renewed commitment to socially purposeful education (WEA, 2012) - these drivers might actually threaten the WEA itself.

Yet, one might argue that such, "Unprecedented and accelerated change" (Lanch, cited in Doyle, 2003, p.3) is nothing new for the WEA, and that it has had to reinvent itself on more than one occasion to survive or fulfil its mission. In fact, an illustrative example of this can be shown in the way the WEA has continuously revised its mission statement, which throughout its very long history, has seen it evolve from the original commitment in 1903 to, "Promote the higher education of working men" into something arguably more inclusive one hundred years later by aiming to, "Provide high quality education to those adults who need it most and missed out first time around" (WEA, 2005/6, p.1). In 2012 the WEA mission was refreshed again; this time communicating the WEA's *vision* for, "A better world, equal, democratic and just; through adult education the WEA challenges and inspires individuals, communities and society" (WEA, 2013).

Moving with the times then, the WEA has not only managed to continue but expand and diversify its operations, and it is of interest to this study to find out to what extent the external drivers of policy, and the growth of the free market in education have affected the WEA and its ability to deliver its special educational mission. As WEA Tutor Organisers historically have played a crucial role in this, I was particularly keen to learn how these agents have been affected; in what ways they perceive their roles to have altered; and more specifically, to find out if structural changes have played a significant role in affecting their agency.

It is clear from my research into educational policy over the last 30 years that a fundamental shift has been taking place, with heightened levels of activity from New Labour in the 90's and Noughties, and so the following chapter is dedicated to exploring that fundamental shift - as well as offering a perspective of what this changing educational climate bodes - for those active in socially purposeful education. The central thrust of my argument here focuses in on the creation and functioning of two quangoes in particular: the Learning and Skills Council and OFSTED (Office For Standards in Education). Together they have radically re-aligned practices of the sector to a neo-liberal agenda and purposefully re-oriented post compulsory education to serve the interests of capitalism.

Linking the funding mechanism to the quality assurance function - a hallmark feature of New Labour's education policy – provided, through the atomistic social ontology of OFSTED, the, "Ideological legitimation for New Managerialism in education" (Willmott, 2007, p132). This, in turn, paved the way to restructure organisations, enabling the Learning and Skills Council (now the Skills Funding Agency) to define pedagogic action, and OFSTED (which at the time of writing replaced the Adult Learning Inspectorate) to endorse it, thus ensuring a ubiquitous adherence to, "[A]n intensified codification and regulation of teachers' working practices, alongside an increased emphasis on standards, targets, quality and delivery" resulting in the, "Hegemonic construction of a new consensus on the nature of teaching and learning" (Mulderigg, 2003).

As Taylor writes,

"This has been an insidious process, and, combined with the centralised, bureaucratic controls of funding, audit functions and policy direction, threatens to undermine the very nature and purpose of the post-compulsory education system" (Taylor, 2007, p.13).

The creation of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) is significant as it was established through the eponymous Act of 2001 to fund and manage all adult education and training. It has singularly brought about a complete ideological reconceptualisation of education which, under the banner of raising educational standards, has advanced a 'banking' model of education in areas of learning traditionally characterised by their informality or their commitment to providing a critical and liberal education. This has made adult learning more like school: with abstract knowledge and accreditation replacing experiential collectivist notions of learning to transform the community. Indeed, since the Adult Learning Inspectorate was incorporated by OFSTED in 2006, all education – including adult education - is now judged with the same 'uniform metric' as state primary and secondary schools (Corbett, 2008, p.1).

This is significant because unlike formal methods of education, many adult education models, including informal, transformative education or socially purposeful education, do not lend themselves to being evaluated in this way, as they are wholly incommensurate with the technicist, quality assurance methodology that prevails today. Thick descriptions that used to tell local tutors about how adults learn, have been replaced with national standardised tests, and contrived instruments of assessment have been introduced to measure learning because it is assumed that, "Closer monitoring, standardization of curriculum and assessment will improve the quality and the activity...as well as the academic and social outcomes that emerge from it" (ibid, p. 9). OFSTED's positivist approach thus assumes that educational providers perform independently of contextual constraints as, "Ranking grades appear to present performance in a clear unbiased light seemingly generating objective data about comparative performance" (ibid, p.11).

Doyle believes it is this process which has the power to erode the identity of the WEA because it forces them away from the democratic, creative, complexities of dialogue and negotiation, towards standardisation and content based learning, fuelling his fears that, "The role of the tutor, as traditionally defined and valued, is under threat" as is the, "Ability of students to exercise control over their own learning process" (2003, p.86). A more disturbing aspect of such 'scientific objectivism' is its ability to completely undermine an organisation's commitment to achieving social justice, as a provider's failure to meet the inspectorate's 'uniform metric' earns them a poor reputation, putting the organisation at risk. Providers in this category are shown to be a drain on finite economic resources, weakening any possibility of future public support should their service be threatened on the basis of quality, performance and value for money. As Doyle notes, when, "Notions of public accountability are distorted...professional independence and integrity risk being undermined" (ibid).

Even more disturbing than ideological compliance is Corbett's belief that the real motive behind such 'scientific objectivism' is to sell or privatise public services, but as Sears points out,

"Privatisation should not be seen as simply a reduction in the breadth of state activity, but rather as an active policy of extending market discipline...[and] the decommodified spaces of education are being eroded as part of the elimination of any spaces outside of market relations" (Sears, 2003, p.18 and p.21).

The WEA might arguably be one of those 'decommodified spaces' whose identity is being eroded in this way. In 2004, the Association chose to abandon its original and democratic federation of Branches and Districts, and replace them with nine administrative regions to reflect the administrative geography of the Learning and Skills Council. Whilst this transformation may secure Government funding, many within the Association fear that it is costing the movement its organisational freedom to define its own practices, with the

result that adult education, shaped by Government policy, will ultimately mirror compulsory education.

The success of the School Effectiveness Research Movement in the compulsory sector resonates strongly with the individualist social ontology of neo-liberalism that underpins the commodification of education in England and Wales (Willmott, 2003, p.131), "Where we as consumers are forced/schooled to become expert quantifiers looking for bargains and knowing exactly what everything is 'worth' " (Corbett, 2008, p.13). As Mulderrig points out though, the consequences of commodification affect more than just professional praxis because,

"Creating a business agenda in and for education involves a complex *structural and content-based transformations*. The structural aspects entail processes termed marketisation and managerialism" (Mulderrig, 2003, my italics).

As performative managerialist processes promote commodification and marketisation across the whole of the post-compulsory sector, organisational systems and structures are radically transformed, affecting all aspects of professional practice, and it is here, within the neo-liberal agenda, that the threat to alternative pedagogy is located.

As Wrigley points out,

"This radical commodification affects all areas of life. Pleasures which were once free (play in open spaces, the countryside, interpersonal communications) are replaced by those which are bought and sold. We are living through a cultural equivalent of the economic dispossession brought about by the enclosure of common land (England) and the highland clearances (Scotland)" (Wrigley, 2007, p.4).

I would argue that the WEA has experienced this ideological restructuring first-hand, and despite the knowledge that the 2004 reorganisation has brought administrative rationality and financial fitness to the organisation, it has not been able to wipe away the deep feelings of sadness and loss; of colleagues; of historic Branches and Districts; and of a role that is virtually synonymous with the WEA: the Tutor Organiser.

Therefore, in order to assess the impact of neo-liberal education policy on informal, collective transformative education, I have chosen to focus on the WEA: primarily because it is the only voluntary educational organisation left that has always expressed a commitment to educating and consciousness-raising amongst the working class, for a more just society. So to what extent has policy affected the organisational structure of the WEA and the agency of its members in delivering the historic mission? Is the WEA identity under threat as Doyle has claimed? My research questions consider the following:

1. How is the structure of the WEA connected to the activity of its key agents, (the former Tutor Organisers) and the delivery of its historic educational mission?
2. To what extent have internal and/or external developments changed the structure of the WEA, and what has been the impact of this upon the former Tutor Organisers and the mission?
3. What role/s do the individual identities of former Tutor Organisers play in shaping organisational identity, and how useful is this?
4. What opportunities exist for the former Tutor Organisers to exercise agency and for the WEA to continue delivering socially purposeful education?

## Approach

As I have said, my reasons for choosing the WEA provided me with a suitable site of practice with which to explore the impact of policy on informal, transformative adult education, but my reasons for choosing to interview long serving former Tutor Organisers of the WEA owed much to the fact they were key agents of the movement with a unique vantage point in the organisation, and as such ideally positioned to perceive changes that would affect professional practice and the functioning of the WEA. By listening to them, I hoped to learn about how they came to be associated with the WEA; what drew them to the role of Tutor Organiser; how the educational climate had changed during their tenure and what effect this has had on them. More specifically, I hoped to understand how an instrumental vision of education has impacted on those who are active in providing an alternative form of education, and one that is geared to achieving equality and justice rather than serving the needs of the labour market.

Initial access to the research participants proved difficult, until I met a senior member of the WEA to scope out the territory, who, as a result of that meeting, agreed to participate herself. She enjoyed the interview process and sent a positive testimonial to another former Tutor Organiser who she thought might also be interested, and of interest to me too (appendix 1). Each new participant that arrived was interviewed and ended up recommending another, and this continued until I had achieved a viable research cohort of three men and three women (appendix 2). As part of the research process I kept a reflective diary, which I used quite frequently at the beginning to make sense of my approach, choosing to 'travel with', rather than 'mine', information from the participants (Kvale, 1996, pp.3-4). It was clear after the first interview just how influential the participant's life experiences had been in building their personal identity, and in turn, how inextricably intertwined this was with the development of their professional identities. As Archer explains in 'Being Human',

"[W]e do not make our personal identities under the circumstances of our own choosing. Our placement in society rebounds upon us, affecting the

persons we become, but also and more forcefully influencing the social identities which we can achieve" (Archer, 2000, p.10).

This 'interanimation' between personal and professional identities was found to be true for all the participants in this study, and their narrative data illustrates this beautifully, revealing in detail how their unique individuality emerged and how their personal motivations were used to inform their social identities, and over time, their professional agency. This level of congruence between the personal and professional is perhaps unsurprising of a voluntary organisation, but what is noteworthy is that the WEA seems to have actively made use of the Tutor Organisers' social identities, effectively developing them further into powerful agents capable of delivering the WEA mission. This reciprocal relationship may be the reason why the WEA, unlike many other educational establishments, manages to retain its employees, some of whom boast very lengthy careers indeed. The quality and richness of the data reflects all of this and therefore cannot simply be defined as career conversations. They are, in fact, narratives that recreate the life worlds of people who have chosen to act out what is most important to them in life, but do so under the auspices of the WEA. As Archer points out, "We are who we are because of what we care about: in delineating our ultimate concerns and accommodating our subordinate ones, we define ourselves" (ibid).

Faced with six unique and highly reflexive biographical narratives, I chose to use Archer's morphogenetic cycle for the analysis rather than other frameworks: critical feminist theory, discourse analysis, or more socio-psychological approaches because, for me, it accurately illustrates a dynamic, contingent and stratified process of identity formation and re-formation that criss-crosses between personal and professional identities, as well as structures. This offers a theory sophisticated enough to make sense of the narratives and the complicatedness of real life without internal contradiction or conflation. I also felt Archer's analytical framework communicated the concept of the corporate agent well, which seemed a useful and fitting way to make sense of the transitions between personal and social identity that the tutors illustrated in their accounts. In addition, I found the social

theorist's life affirming beliefs and values about the human condition to be perfectly suited to those views expressed by the cohort themselves, who readily confront the forces that 'impoverish humanity' (Archer, 2000, p.4).

Whilst the former Tutor Organisers challenge these forces within a work setting on a day to day basis, Archer's confrontation is on a theoretical plane: bringing to book post modernists and social constructionists who strip actors of potential in order to reclaim human agency (Archer, 2000, p.162). Positivist ontologies which support the neo-liberal agenda suppose closed systems and atomistic events, and therefore can only cast people as, "Passive sensors of given facts and recorders of their given constant conjunctions" (Bhaskar, 1989, pp.49-50), which is a portrait of human agency that is at odds with the experiences, beliefs and actions of the cohort, who, in their personal and professional lives have nurtured and supported the development of people as critical actors, fully cogniscent of their own historically contingent development, who will play their own part in creating a 'tolerable society' (Tawney, 1931, p.197).

## Summary

In this chapter, I share some of my own personal experiences that have played a formative role in shaping my positionality on the issues raised in this thesis. Insights gained from both personal and professional spheres have convinced me of the continuing salience of class in the UK, and of the failure of educational policies to effectively address the growing class divide. In the academic rationale, I show how the working class - identifiable through the restrictions they face in accessing power, privilege and resources - are particularly disadvantaged by instrumental forms of education, the prime function of which has always been to serve the needs of capitalism. I reveal how the whole education sector, including adult education, is being ideologically restructured along these lines: marketising a service traditionally regarded as a public good. This has brought with it the performative forces of commodification and alienation: saturating the sector with one dominant and 'classed perspective' of education.

It is for these reasons that an alternative pedagogy is needed, and why the current climate should be understood as threatening to educators and organisations that believe the purpose of education goes beyond the economic imperative. Despite its diversification since 1903, I suggest that the WEA continues to be an organisation committed to addressing inequalities by using an alternative educational pedagogy, and it is for this reason I use the WEA and its key agents as a vehicle to explore the impact of policy on informal, transformative adult education and its effects upon agency. I introduce the analytical framework used to interrogate the data and outline the suitedness of a critical realist approach, and more specifically the sophistication of Archer's morphogenetic cycle in dealing with the complex and contradictory nature of human agency.

## Chapter Two: A Changing Educational Climate

This chapter focuses on the re-conceptualisation of education and how the landscape has changed since the publication of the Russell Report in 1973, to the Leitch Review in 2005. This timeframe is useful to this study for two reasons: firstly, it illustrates within a single generation the fundamental shift towards a state managed adult education policy; and secondly it is a period in which the participants for this research were professionally active in the WEA. These former Tutor Organisers would have felt the 'winds of change' and experienced first-hand the impact of changes upon their professional practice. How individual professional identities have been affected is analysed in chapter five, but there is also the impact upon the organisational identity itself to consider. More specifically, how the powerful, ideological concepts that gained ground during this time such as professionalism, managerialism and public accountability, have restructured the movement of adult education, and whether this represents a serious challenge to the WEA's unique historic precedence. However, in order to understand a particular adult education policy or practice,

"[I]t is necessary to examine both its relationship to broad political, economic and cultural influences as well as the microprocesses of policy construction or adult education in particular places" (Foley, 2000, p.97).

To this end, I offer a brief contextual orientation of each decade to follow my argument, beginning with the Seventies and moving through the Eighties, Nineties and Noughties to look at the socio-economic factors and policies that shaped the climate to what it is today. I conclude with a timeline of selected significant events for that same period. By doing so, I reveal an educational landscape where the transformative practices of collective socially purposeful education, or 'really useful knowledge' have almost been eradicated, replaced by a reinvigorated focus on low level vocational training and basic skills education with the purpose of improving productivity of the national workforce and global competitiveness.

## The 1970's

The economic context in which adult educators of the 70's found themselves was one of crisis: in 1971 the dollar-based Bretton Woods international financial system collapsed, triggering worldwide economic destabilisation, industrial strike action, social unrest and a wave of student rebellions across the industrialised world (Hobsbawm, 1995, pp.285-6). Developed market economies that boomed in the Fordist period of the 50's, and which had sustained expectations for higher wages and better standards of living, now faced the new uncertainties of mass unemployment and unstable inflation. There was also the considerable problem of funding the Welfare State, which for advanced capitalist states in the 70's had developed into, "The greater part of total public expenditure [with] welfare activities form[ing] the largest body of all public employment" (ibid, p.284). This expansion of nationalised and public industries in the 50's and 60's only served to make the cuts that followed the OPEC oil crisis in 1973 seem deeper, and attempts to gain control over rising unemployment, inflation, unofficial 'wildcat' strikes and Britain's 'immigration problem' through the issue of parliamentary bills,<sup>1</sup> came just at the time when many people were becoming politicised.

According to Hobsbawm, although public attitudes and values had started to change in the 60's, it was the sudden and seismic transformations of the 70's that were turning Britain into a densely urban, multi-ethnic nation that caused the major shift towards the Left, making a once conservative population far less deferential (1995, p.288ff). Added to this trend were the relatively new and powerful global forces: feminism, mass youth culture and a growing body of higher education students. Besides injecting a vigorous impetus into their own interest groups, this populous made significant contributions to other liberation movements of the time (ibid, pp.295-319). Inspired by this spirit of the age, many adult educators wanted to become part of a movement that promised to deliver 'really useful knowledge' which was,

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<sup>1</sup> The Race Relation Bill (1968); the Industrial Relations Bill (1970); and the Sexual Discrimination Bill (1976).

"[A] knowledge of everyday circumstances, including a knowledge of why you were poor, why you were politically oppressed and why through the force of social circumstance, you were the kind of person you were, your character misshapen by a cruel competitive world" (Education Group, 1981, cited in Avis, 2004, p.167).

Educators believed that engaging in these issues would enlighten people about the inequalities that persisted in Britain, and at the same time invite them to be part of a movement that aimed, "To provide a fair social distribution of chances to learn, earn and to live in modern society" (Lovett, 1975, p.8). Many educators of the 70's felt strongly that the adult curricula needed to be grounded in day-to-day realities: to be of use to the learners and motivate them to develop their critical intelligence in order to address structural inequalities and discrimination. The idea of education being ideologically neutral could not be entertained and the leading lights in adult education such as Freire, Dewey, Lindeman and Horton of Highlander to name but a few, clearly regarded education as a branch of politics (Lovett, 1975, p.17; Jarvis, 1987, p.255; Foley, 1999, p.6ff). These realisations sharpened the purpose and practices of adult education in the 70's and experience and action became the defining characteristics of the movement. As Horton reasoned, true learning can only ever result from a process of internalising knowledge gained through experience and reflected upon by analysis and a commitment to action (cited in Jarvis, 1987, p.261).

According to Freire, this connection between thought and action was only achievable if individuals had a 'critical comprehension of reality' (1978, p.24). Therefore the role and function of adult education in the 70's was to raise consciousness: a process whereby men and women, not as recipients but knowing subjects, could gain a deepening awareness of the socio-cultural reality shaping their lives and of the capacity to transform that reality (Jarvis, 1987, p.270). Operating within this definition of adult education, educators of the 70's were more *facilitators of knowledge*, skilled in posing problems about, "Codified existential situations in order to help the learners arrive at an increasingly critical view of reality" (ibid, p. 272). This approach, far removed from the deficit theories of educational

policy today, starts with what people know, and encourages the use of their own definitions to generate discussion, through which themes are problematised and new knowledge generated. This ability of adult educators to foster egalitarian relationships and dialogue was key because,

"Radical pedagogy requires non-authoritarian social relationships that support dialogue and communication as indispensable for questioning the meaning and nature of knowledge and peeling away the hidden structures of reality" (Giroux, 1981, p.133).

The concept that knowledge itself is socially structured and controlled is one of Freire's most important contributions to adult education because, according to Jarvis, it liberated the learner and enabled him or her to become an agent in the world (1987, p.277). However, as Hamilton and Cunningham (1989) stress, in order to become an agent in the first place an individual must situate themselves within a collaborative learning *group*, so that social meaning and a movement for change can then be developed. Thus, the primary purpose behind much adult education of the 70's was to foster agency, and the function of its critical constitutive elements, for example collaborative learning, and consciousness-raising - was done with the purpose of inspiring an educative movement for social, economic and political change.

Those involved with this emergent, dynamic profession were drawn from a wide number of disciplines and found employment in a variety of settings: charities, local authorities or extra mural departments in universities, making adult education a very broad church. Despite this though, there was a surprising amount of consensus amongst educators, who incorporated many of the ideas from influential thinkers at the time, like those from Kidd, which could be summed up as,

1. the motivation to learn is intrinsic
2. adults learn throughout their life and the nature of learning must be drawn from all fields

3. there is a social context to learning
4. the most effective learning is through the voluntary association of individuals
5. a commitment to community control

(Thomas, n.d. cited in Jarvis, 1987, p.202).

This broad understanding of adult education was infused by adult educators' experience of, and sympathies with, the trade unions and other contemporary social movements (Crowther, J. and Shaw, M., 1997, p.275ff), which alongside influences from disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education, politics, philosophy, religion and economics, made adult education a constantly evolving field that was difficult to demarcate (Jarvis, 1987, p.310ff; Foley, 2000, p.16). For these reasons Hirst (1974) and Bright (1985) consider adult education to be a field of practical knowledge rather than a distinct discipline which arguably better suits its transformative intentions and movement structure. However, difficulties persisted, because how does one define - or for that matter defend - a form of professional praxis that has always been a contested site of struggle? McCullough elucidates the problem that has plagued adult education from the outset,

"Extracting adult education from its surrounding social milieu – or at least differentiating adult education from the social milieu – is as difficult as determining how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Is adult education a practice or a program? A methodology or an organisation? A science or system? A process or a profession? Is it different from continuing education, vocational education, higher education? Does adult education have form and substance, or does it merely permeate through the environment like air? Is adult education, therefore, everywhere and yet nowhere in particular? Does adult education even exist?"

(McCullough, 1980, p.158).

Despite the infinite complexities that arise with attempts to demarcate the territory of adult education more precisely, efforts to do so still continue, with relatively recent definitions being offered by Foley (2000), who chooses to distinguish between formal; non-formal; informal and incidental learning. In amongst these competing definitions

and multiple manifestations of adult education, there is yet another, older understanding of adult education to consider - and one that is particularly relevant to this study - as it is primarily motivated by a concern for, and commitment to democracy, because as Kidd explained,

"The man (sic) who is offered only a minimum of learning, skills enough for drudgery but not for development, may turn on us and destroy us. It is the scarcely literate, the partially educated who are the pawns and dupes of the political adventurers, half skilled people, scarred with failure and eaten by envy of those who have greater opportunities. Dangers lurk for all of us when we refuse anyone the chance to develop towards his full capacity"

(Kidd, from his unpublished memoirs, n.d. cited in Jarvis, 1987, p.211ff).

Such concerns had long since motivated the WEA, and as early as 1908 a report from the Joint Committee on Adult Education commented on the need to educate the working class so as, "To enable them to show foresight in their choice of political means" - providing an additional reformist note that if WEA education was endorsed by the state, it would provide a, "Potent influence on the side of industrial peace" (1909, cited in Fieldhouse, 1996, p.4).

Founded as an educational movement and organised to practice as well as preach the principles of democracy, one might assume that the WEA flourished in the 70's and that its agents actively and successfully fulfilled the organisational mission. However, this should not be assumed - and nor should the official history of the WEA be accepted uncritically - for as I reveal in the following chapter there is reason to contest the Association's claims to being a genuinely working class and democratic movement. The veracity of the WEA as a working class organisation features heavily in adult education literature, and whilst the Association has always endeavoured to maintain an educational commitment to the working class, there is no doubt that the WEA has struggled, periodically, to do this. Indeed as Doyle comments, by the mid 50's working class participation in the WEA had dropped to one tenth (2003, p.24ff), a disappointing statistic for the Association - and a trend that continued well into the 70's. As Tom Lovett recalls of

the time, the WEA then was, "Just as far removed from the working class and their problems as any other educational organisation" (1975, p.12).

However, to be fair, the WEA did try to reconnect with the 'educationally underprivileged' and specifically tried to address the great cultural, political and social upheavals of the time through the activities of a younger generation of Tutor Organisers, although Doyle admits that these activities, "Did not allow the WEA to be at ease with itself" (2003, p.25). This was partly because these new programmes moved away from the traditional WEA diet of social history and economics: popular after the First World War when people were eager to understand the 'social problem' (Dover-Wilson, 1928, p.58) to topics with more community appeal: short courses in trade union studies, community development and women's studies. But as Fieldhouse suggests, it was also partly because these new activities had little or no involvement from the Branches, bypassing the structures that supported the WEA voluntary movement altogether (1996, p.186). The new Community Programme was also challenging for seasoned WEA tutors because it demanded a different skill set that focussed not on specialist knowledge, but on *facilitation skills*, deployed by the tutors to ground the personal perspectives of people's lived experiences within a critical pedagogy. As a result, the Association increasingly began to look for qualified all-rounders rather than experts, who, besides being good facilitators, were also capable of sourcing external funds, organising courses and recruiting students, all of which had a direct impact upon another quintessential WEA role: the lay tutor.

Reactions to the Community Programme were mixed and two camps emerged, with the 'radicals' wishing to reconnect with the working class through the more targeted and relevant Community Programme, and the 'traditionalists' wanting to continue with the more academically robust Liberal Programme that had always been delivered in the Branches. This internal divide, and the structural consequences that arose from it, achieved enduring status when the Government granted the Association £100,000 to expand this new programme and deliver the 'Russell Priorities' of 1973 which focused on,

"Education for those in urban areas, [the] socially and culturally deprived; work in an industrial context, mainly trade union studies; 'developing greater social and political awareness' and liberal and academic study below the level of university work" (Roberts, 2003, p.262).

Whilst this injection of funds boosted the WEA and its new Community Programme, it did so at a cost, and according to Fieldhouse contributed directly to the decline of the Liberal Programme (1996, p.191). On the positive side, the Community Programme increased Tutor Organiser autonomy and according to Lovett enabled the WEA to operate, "In working class neighbourhoods with less emphasis on formal class and subjects" (1975, p.146). As Foley writes, this was particularly true of women's studies, which often developed out of informal consciousness-raising groups, before becoming established in adult education and extra mural departments at universities throughout the 70's (2000, p.50). For this reason, Lovett believed the WEA - and more specifically the Tutor Organiser role - to be, "The most important single resource available to the working class in Great Britain" (1975, p.146).

Radical adult education seemed a 'real possibility' to adult educators of the 70's and those like Lovett and Jowitt believed they had found the 'holy grail' (Jowitt, 2007), supported as they were by a generous adult education policy that saw the value of adult education,

"[N]ot solely to be measured by direct increases in earning power or productive capacity or by any other materialistic yardstick, but by *the quality of life it inspires in the individual and generates for the community at large*. It is an agent of changing and improving our society: but for each individual the means of change may differ and each must develop in his own way, at his own level and through his own talents" (Russell Committee, 1973, p. xi, my italics).

However, in retrospect some commentators feel that the Russell Report did not go far enough as,

"[I]t led to precious little development of a major kind, largely accepting as it did the current structure of a system and calling in vain for new financial

commitments that no British Government of any complexion has ever been prepared to make" (Bell, 1996, p.158).

Whatever influence the Russell Priorities might have had was short-lived. The election of the Conservatives in 1979 checked progressive notions of education that aimed to right the injustices of society (Jarvis, 1993, p.44), and marshalled powerful ideological forces that would, once again, return the labour market as the engine of educational policy and practice, rendering adult education, "More directly vocational in the hope and expectation that this would contribute to economic recovery" (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.8).

## **The 1980's**

The 80's marked a watershed in the social and economic history of Britain as Labour's post-war 'politics of consensus' came to an end, and with it the Keynesian techniques used to manage the domestic economy which prioritised:

1. full employment, through stimulating the economy by cutting taxes or boosting state spending
2. an acceptance of trade unions, consulting them on economic matters and workplace relations
3. state ownership of major utilities such as gas, coal, rail and electricity etc., with state intervention to plan the economy
4. the welfare state, funded by general taxation to provide a national insurance system that offered essential lifelong protection against accident, ill-health, poverty and unemployment
5. the redistribution of wealth through progressive taxation and,
6. redistributive welfare spending and comprehensive education to bring about greater equity.

(Kavanagh, 2003, p.1).

The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 swept aside this social contract, (Hodgson and Spours, 1999, p.5) replacing it with the monetarist policies of Hayek and Friedman which authorised the Conservatives to drastically cut public services, privatise domestic assets

and weaken the bargaining power of the trade union movement <sup>2</sup> (Regan, 2007). It was a decade of contradiction and extremes, with a few enjoying unprecedented wealth whilst the many experienced economic recession and social break-down. From 1971-1981 the gap between rich and poor in the UK widened, and a new underclass was created out of those who were either unable or unwilling to 'get on their bike'<sup>3</sup> to find work. However, the problems that dogged the 70's, such as long-term structural unemployment and inflation did not disappear but worsened, giving rise to soaring interest rates of 15%; 3 million unemployed by 1981 and growing unrest in some of Britain's largest cities - especially amongst black and young people - where unemployment hit hardest<sup>4</sup> (Peacock, 1982, p.298).

Britain's industrial decline was tangible, particularly in the industrial heartlands of the Midlands and the North, and its demise was exacerbated by the newly industrialised competitors from Asia who were making their mark in new technologies and global communication systems. Unable to compete in this area of development, or mask the extent of its decline by North Sea oil revenues, Britain's economic situation became precarious, forcing the Government to borrow heavily, invite foreign investment and sell off its domestic assets such as council housing, British Telecom and British Rail (ibid, p.337).

The fall of Soviet Communism in Europe in the late 80's was another blow to an already emasculated UK trade union movement,<sup>5</sup> which was in no fit state to counter the new politics of 'choice' that had led Thatcher to announce that there was, "No such thing as society, only individuals" (Hobsbawm, 1995, p.337). Indeed, as traditional norms and family values were increasingly rejected for the, "Unlimited autonomy of individual desire" (ibid, p.334), the very glue that had once kept communities and society together

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<sup>2</sup> Employment Act 1980 prohibited closed shop practices and secondary picketing.

<sup>3</sup> A slogan coined by Conservative MP Norman Tebbit.

<sup>4</sup> In 1981 riots broke out in Toxteth, Liverpool; Moss-side, Manchester; Southall and Brixton, London – later spreading to other areas across the country.

<sup>5</sup> Trade union membership fell from 12 million in 1979 to 7 million by 1993 (McIlroy, 1995 cited in Mayo and Thompson, 1995, p.147).

began to dissolve, and with it the sense of national identity and stability. Perversely, as these identities fragmented - resulting in the politics of independence and devolution - the forces of globalisation advanced, superseding political and geographical demarcations and making the world's peoples more interdependent, not less (Hobsbawm, 1995, p.342, p.417, pp.424-5).

In this climate, the cuts to public services represented a 'very severe jolt' to the education sector and instead of the 10 year programme of investment promised in 1972, many teacher training colleges were forced to close. Higher Education establishments reduced student numbers by 6 per cent whilst drastically increasing their fees to overseas students in order to meet the new financial constraints (Walker, 1984, p.435). The extent of these cuts masked the ideological nature of Thatcher's policies which, far from, 'rolling back the state' sought greater state control (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.8), exhibiting a deep mistrust of professionals as more effective measures were introduced to limit their independent agency (Jarvis, 1993, p.115). The Trade Union Act (1980) and the Education Reform Act (1988) are especially illustrative of this, showing Government intervention to be particularly directive in those organisations with strong identities and a history of nurturing individual and collective agency. According to McIlroy, the TUC's response to the Act sought, "Subordinate accommodation with Thatcherism" (1995, p.149), and its new 'get real' attitude only served to limit the agency of its own members, and restrict the movement further,

"Far from being broadened and radicalised to deal with the radical challenge of Thatcherism the curriculum of courses remained geared to technical training for organising and bargaining as the very basis for organising and bargaining was being disrupted by an economic, political and ideological offensive. Yet any real explicit political and economic analysis to deal with this remained absent from courses. This was the real failure, one which cannot be underestimated" (McIlroy, 1995, p.151).

Similarly, the Education Act (1988) contained and subordinated the agency of teachers by forcing them to deliver a mandatory, standardised National Curriculum and a new suite of

vocational qualifications, as well as supervise regular testing at ages 6/7, 10/11 and 13/14, representing a fundamental U-turn from the progressive approaches in education of the 60's and 70's. These reforms triggered an ideological restructuring of compulsory education, enabling the 'causal and reciprocal' processes of privatisation, commercialisation and commodification of the sector to take hold (Greaves, Hill and Maisura, 2007, p.3), resulting too, in greater curriculum time for mathematics, science, design and technology and IT at the expense of the arts, social sciences and history (Wrigley, 2007). According to Wrigley (2007), these changes have undermined the student's ability to understand and interpret their social world and to effectively challenge the dominant wisdom because,

"If you don't know history, it's as if you were born yesterday. And if you were born yesterday, anybody in a position of power can tell you anything and you have no way of checking up on it" (Zinn, 2005, cited in Wrigley, 2007).

Both Wrigley (2007) and Jarvis (1993) believe these developments re-routed, "Education away from individual needs to the demands of the industrial and commercial sector of society" to deliver the continuous production of agents, thereby effectively ensuring 'ideological retrenchment'.

Despite the rhetoric accompanying the 1988 Education Reform Act, which promised parents and schools greater rights and freedoms, its mandatory, prescriptive nature in fact put an end to any meaningful notions of democracy in education. Far from being more inclusive, as Conservative politician Keith Joseph argued at the time, it initiated students into a, "Relentless culture of competition" (Tomlinson, 2006, p.52) that was advanced by an exclusive system of individual certification. This rise in 'credentialism' in education, in turn, created a new underclass out of those who failed to achieve any form of certification or qualification, serving only to reinforce and deepen inequalities as modern bureaucracies increasingly rely on this as a means of allocating college places or jobs,

"When we hear from all sides for the introduction of regular curricula and special examinations, the reason behind it is, of course, not a sudden awakened 'thirst for education', but the desire for restricting the supply of these positions and their monopolisation by the owners of educational certificates. Today the 'examination' is the universal means of this monopolisation and therefore examinations irresistibly advance" (Gerth and Mills, 1948, pp.241-2).

Although this study is primarily concerned with the impact of educational policy on the informal, adult sector, the reforms instigated throughout the compulsory sector are very relevant to the post-compulsory and voluntary sectors because, firstly, this new 'uniform metric' in schools ultimately created a great swathe of adults who, as a result of their experiences became reticent and fearful of learning, harbouring little or no intention of ever returning to learning (Sargant and Field, 1997); and secondly because, of the few who did return to learning, educators reported entrenched negative attitudes to learning with low levels of confidence and belief in their ability to learn. Thirdly, changes to the compulsory sector are relevant to the field of adult education in that they provide a reasonable indicator of what might follow in the post-compulsory sector.

Despite this political shift to the Right and a return to a more instrumental form of schooling, transformative adult education praxis did not only continue but flourished during the 80's, with many radical initiatives of the time claiming to be supported by two concepts in particular: andragogy and experiential based learning. Clearly part of the progressive tradition within adult education, these process models of learning became enshrined within its curricula and methods (Jarvis, 1987, p.125), lending adult educators a theoretical rationale to their practice; providing a stark contrast to the trends being promoted in compulsory education at that time.

In reviewing the literature, this contrast between adult and compulsory education has been interpreted by some as evidence of a definitive divide between the two, with adult education often cast as more radical than its compulsory relation. Yet selective reflections from Tom Lovett (1975) and the former Principal of Northern College, Professor Tony Jowitt (2007), have questioned the reality of radical adult education beyond the dreams and aspirations of

a handful of adult educators like themselves. Therefore, it follows that if the radical credentials of adult education itself are under scrutiny, then so are the theories which best informed it at the time: Kolb's theory of experiential learning and Knowles' theory of adult learning: andragogy.

Once the preserve of adult education, both these theories have since crossed over into mainstream education and training, countering the claims of exclusivity that surround process oriented learning theory which have often been associated with adult education generally, and radical adult education in particular. However, I would argue that the success of this transition owes much to the fact that these theories have been altered through the process of ideological restructuring in education, transforming former process models of education (believed suitable for adults), into content based learning techniques. For example, Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which has obvious merits for a workplace setting as it involves, "The conscious attempt to establish situations which provide learning in a real context" (Andresen, Boud and Cohen, 2000, p.233ff), has been adapted with the result that learning (and therefore the teaching) becomes focussed on expected outcomes.

This development, initially arising from the need to minimise the unpredictability and indeterminacy of Experience-Based Learning (EBL), and to solve some practical issues related to assessment and accreditation, enhanced Kolb's theory and the importance accorded to EBL within the growing sector of vocational learning (ibid, p.234ff). Through this route especially, competency emerged as a measure with which workplace learning assessors could evidence progress and attainment, squeezing out the features of a process model of learning that formerly accommodated possibilities for incidental or group learning, as well as other forms of knowledge making such as problem solving, analysis and theorising.

A comparable transformation has similarly affected Knowles' contentious theory of andragogy - the boundaries of which are still contested to this day - resulting in what earlier critics feared would turn out to be 'gogymania' (Jarvis, 1987, p.179). Yet despite

this, Knowles continued to cite his theory as a process model within an adult education setting and revised the typology to that end. To paraphrase Jarvis (1987, p.180), seven specific elements emerge from Knowles' redefinition of andragogy to include:

1. climate setting
2. involving learners in planning
3. involving learners in diagnosing their own needs
4. involving learners in formulating their own learning objectives
5. involving learners in designing their own learning plans
6. helping learners carry out these plans
7. helping learners evaluate their learning

Despite these attempts to preserve its distinctiveness and singularity, Knowles' theory of adult learning continues to find applications beyond its intended use and has even been shown to have a wider, instrumental purpose,

"The transformation of autonomous learning into a methodology for self-directed learning undoubtedly can work to the advantage of management in business and industry. In such contexts, the rhetoric of self-directed learning supports a misleading scenario of adult men and women effectively shaping an important dimension of their everyday working lives while, in fact, the attendant methodology places the direction of their learning subtly, but firmly, in the hands of the experts who serve predominantly institutionalised interests" (Collins, 1991, cited in Heaney, 1996).

This is because Knowles' revised typology was based on *individualist concepts* borrowed from psychotherapy (Boyer, 1984, cited in Jarvis, 1987, p.180) resulting in an emphasis on technique, which provides a sharp contrast to the adult education typologies of the 60's and 70's that stressed voluntary association and the sorts of activities associated with generating a movement (Heaney, 1996). In this way, the humanist remnants of Knowles' original conceptualisation of andragogy were undermined, (Beder, 1987, cited in Heaney,

1996), and with the adult learner cast as consumer, adult education was reduced once again to an instrumental form of schooling (ibid).

Adult educators of the 80's could not have ignored these hegemonic messages and the increasingly individualistic and competitive climate that was emerging in education. Therefore, they could not have realistically expected any state support for an alternative pedagogy that went against the grain (Brookfield, 1987, pp.51-68; Jarvis, 1993, p.80; Foley, 2000, p.52ff). Limited by the constraints of educational policy and thwarted from the political consciousness raising that had come to define adult education in the 70's, they could at least do something to help adults *think* critically which, as Brookfield (1987) suggests, is arguably the vital precursor to political action.

During this time the WEA experienced renewed public interest for critical pedagogy on the one hand, and on the other, a real threat to their existence as the impact of public service cuts and reorganisation began to take effect. The WETUC<sup>6</sup> arm of the Association that delivered trade union education was hit hard, especially since operations had expanded in the previous decade in order to meet the Russell Priorities, but more so because the sustained attack from 1979 up until the early 90's had significantly weakened the trade union movement, leaving TUC and WEA relations very strained as they each fought to retain and deliver their own training to a shrinking membership. Increasingly, a large and growing majority of TUC work became concentrated in the Further Education sector (TUSJ, 1990, cited in Mayo and Thompson, 1995, p.152) and according to McIlroy, whilst a critical minority of TUC tutors fully understood the wider context in which these changes occurred, the majority of tutors were content to regard themselves as technicians with restricted autonomy and, "Fully adjusted to delivering pre-packaged, standardised curricula and pedagogy on behalf of an external authority" (1995, p.161). Whilst McIlroy's perspective may be contested, he nevertheless correctly identifies and locates the full import of the Government's changes to the funding rules, which if it doesn't change beliefs, it certainly changes actions (ibid).

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<sup>6</sup> WETUC stands for Workers Educational Trade Union Committee.

WEA joint university provision was also hard hit in the 80's, and fell into decline as part of a more general contraction of adult education - and although the ACCESS scheme; various new opportunity courses; second chance to learn programmes; issue based courses; community oriented work and part-time certificated courses were successfully retained (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.230ff) it was fair to say that - adult education from the 80's onwards (including Higher Education) increasingly gained funding *only* if it met with state policy objectives (Jarvis, 1993, p.119). As Gelpi argues,

"The repressive forces of our contemporary society are ready to increase the time and space given to education, but only on the condition that it does not bring about a reinforcement of the struggle of men, and of peoples for their autonomy" (Gelpi, 1979, cited in Jarvis, 1987, p.285).

The WEA's core provision was affected too, as the state's new payment by results scheme (in combination with the substantial reduction made to its grant <sup>7</sup>) effectively side-lined the delivery of the Russell Priorities to force a more lucrative switch to 'recreational' work and the promotion of the Community Programme. Whilst this development may have reunited the WEA with the educationally disadvantaged, it did so at the expense of the traditional Liberal Programme, deepening divisions between the 'radicals' and the 'traditionalists' and giving rise to 'unhealthy tension' in the Association (Doyle, 2003, p.25). Whether from necessity or opportunity, some WEA Branches responded to these developments by affiliating with the newly emerging TUC 'Centres Against Unemployment' which, in addition to its traditional functions of offering a focal point for the unemployed, access to concessionary schemes, and advice and counselling, applied contemporary adult education theories to develop provision around coping (Lovett, 1988, p.257).

At the same time, other WEA Branches were exploring different kinds of partnerships and creating new, imaginative ways in which to, "Foster behaviour with a purpose" (Bullough, 1988, cited in Heaney, 1996) and as Bob Fryer recalls,

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<sup>7</sup> In 1983 the WEA grant was cut by £43,000 and further reduced by 8.3% (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.193).

"One of the most exciting areas of growth in recent adult education for working class women has arisen directly from their involvement in the 1984-85 Miners' strike... Amongst the wide range of studies, one of the most innovative and prolific has been the writer's workshop" (Fryer, 1990, cited in Simon, 1992, p.292).

Creative, localised opportunities to deliver the WEA mission continued for most of the decade until 1988 when, as part of a wider attack on local Government, the Conservatives abolished local authority grants altogether. This singular act had a profound impact on the local power structure of the WEA, directly undermining the independence of its semi-autonomous Branches and Districts by re-routing power through the National Association, which up until that point had been a relatively weak administrative body. This initial centralisation of the WEA, triggered externally, was then escalated in 1991 when an industrial tribunal cast doubt on the legal independence of WEA Districts, prompting the Association to integrate and further centralise its arrangements (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.19ff; Doyle, 2003, p.25ff).

No longer a Responsible Body and facing serious financial constraints, the WEA had become essentially a statutory body by the end of the 80's (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.193), delivering the kind of adult education that was in line with policy; with the state exercising, "Control over all forms of education, including universities and adult education, by the way that it...allocated funds" (Jarvis, 1993, p.47). As a result, adult education became managed, "Little enough by inspiration" (Jarvis, 1987, p.72), and by the late 80's Jarvis lamented that, "Adult education with a fiery will is a thing of the past and with each year beginning to radiate a romantic glow" (ibid).

With the new ideological foundations laid firm right across the sector, instrumental educational policy continued apace in the early Nineties, and with it; a rise in competency based teaching and learning methodologies; standardised quality assurance frameworks; testing and certification. The acceleration in the commodification of learning and marketisation of education continued until 1996 when the Conservatives'

time in office ended. However, during their tenure they had shown how, through sustained attacks upon the public sector - and in particular on the teaching profession - wholesale ideological restructuring could be achieved, but also how education policy could be used to steer the economy, tactics that would not be reversed Under New Labour in the 90's and Noughties, nor under the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition which followed.

## **The 90's and the New Millennium**

If the 80's signalled fragmentation and alienation of all that was familiar, the 90's and Noughties were the decades of disintegration where the world had, "Lost its bearings and slid into insularity and crisis" (Hobsbawm, 1995, p.403). The eventual collapse of the Soviet Union after 1989 left Russia much reduced in size and dozens of neighbouring unofficial states vulnerable to separatism. The former great powers and mediators that, in earlier times, had constituted the international system (amongst them France and Great Britain), were mostly reduced to regional status, leaving the USA as the only real superpower of the new millennium (ibid, p.559). The potential for war and political destabilisation was therefore immense, added to which was the additional threat of Islamic fundamentalism whose actions culminated in the bombing of the Twin Towers on 11/9/2001.

As the 90's phenomenon of globalisation gathered pace, neo-liberal policies and global structural adjustment programmes spread around the globe (Greaves, Hill and Maisura, 2007) creating a new and exploitative international division of labour. Unable to compete with the substantially lower wage economies of China and India, the West increasingly lost services and manufacturing to offshore companies in the East (Foley, 2000, p.118ff). As economies restructured to the continuously shifting new demands of capital and labour, many workers at home and abroad found their skills downgraded or outmoded, forcing them to retrain, migrate, work illegally or accept welfare – which apart from widening the inequalities gap, fuelled the growing problem of illegal immigration to the West – all contributing to a large rise in the national deficit (Hobsbawm, 1995, p.568ff).

The debate of the 90's was not about the creation of wealth but its distribution, and yet the levels of income and welfare that were taken for granted in the 70's were considered unaffordable in the 90's, even though the income of EEC citizens per capita had risen by 80% during that time (ibid, p.577). This situation intensified in the Noughties and instead of regulating the economy to manage issues of inequality, increasing debt and recurrent financial crises, the UK Government chose to focus on the cost of public services and initiate a new deal about who should pay. Against this backdrop emerged an environmental crisis of global proportions which necessitated the development of new kinds of sustainable, low impact economies within a framework of greater international cooperation (ibid, pp.568-70). Increasing trans-nationalism may have facilitated this, but improved international relations were undermined as the voluntary abdication of national power to 'supra states' brought new political, social and economic instabilities (ibid, p.431, p.424) – especially to the emerging 'independent' states - greatly affecting their capability to buffer the effects of successive crisis. In this climate the International Monetary Fund came to regulate a growing number of economies and restructure them to the market (ibid). The accepted wisdom of the IMF of the 90's proved inadequate by the early years of the Noughties as many western economies slid further into debt, unable to control the devastating impact that a rising number of global financial and banking crises had upon their economies, leading some nations close to defaulting on their international loans.

Global crises, widespread economic destabilisation and growing inequalities characterise the 90's and Noughties, but this picture would not be complete without mentioning one of the most revolutionary developments which both shaped and contributed to the events of this period: the World Wide Web which as it became more mainstream, would forever change every aspect of modern life. The ease and speed with which individuals and organisations could access information definitively changed both the nature of, and relationship to, information and communication, radically altering personal and business relationships - and ultimately human agency too. The potential of this new global technology was not lost on media savvy politicians who realised they could use it to court

instant mass populist appeal and influence the electorate, giving rise to the 90's phenomenon of the celebrity politician.

Moreover, a new younger breed of 'professional' politicians - who had never worked outside of parliament - took advantage of this speedier technology, and also, increasingly, began to use professional quangoes instead of the time consuming business of democratic decision making. Whilst this may have protected their popularity, it estranged them from both ordinary people and the political process, marginalising democratic citizen's rights as,

"Governments took to bypassing both the electorate and its representative assemblies, if possible, or at least to taking decisions first and then challenging both to reverse a fait accompli, relying on the volatility, divisions or inertness of public opinion" (Hobsbawm, 1995, p.580).

Looking back, the 90's could have benefited from having more politicians with emotional integrity, and yet leaders of the time seemed incapable of making decisions for the sake of humanity. Confused by the speed and nature of the effects of globalisation; weakened and isolated by the defeat of state Socialism, the disoriented political Left, critically, failed to muster a coherent response to what was unravelling before them (Yarnit, 1995, p.75). Academics on the Left might have been better equipped than politicians to respond here, but too many collapsed into the 'individual reductionism' of post-modernist theory (Thompson, 1995, pp.132-133) which not only rejected universal truths, but the 'grand narratives' in which they were to be found and out of which, collective action was inspired.

This is an important point to dwell on for the purposes of this study, because the philosophy of post-modernism rendered all truths as mere personal perspectives of equal worth, (Allman and Wallis, 1995, p.26) making it impossible to foster any form of consensus upon which purposeful action could be based. Thus, if post-modernism stood for anything, it stood for the ultimate futility of agency in which, "Power...has been

displaced into the spaces between minimal encounters, and the disparate exchanges and negotiations of everyday life" (ibid, p.132).

In this climate it became conceivable for the British Left to either ignore or reject the continuing relevance of class and for the Labour Party, which governed the latter part of the 90's and most of the Noughties, to jettison their traditional Party policy and values for the 'Third Way'. The 'Third Way' - a highly contested concept that claims to reconcile capitalism with social justice - relies heavily on a stakeholder approach between the state, the individual and employers to meet the rising costs of public services (Coffield, 2001; Hodgson and Spours, 1999). Whilst the Left's commitment to a more equitable society appeared to remain, it became secondary to the imperative of a strong and stable economy, marking a new period of consensus with the political Right that increasingly sought to, "Improve the skills of young people and adults in the workforce ... and so raise UK productivity" (Delivering Results – A Strategy till 2006, p.15).

Other examples of policy convergence between New Labour and the neo-liberal Right can be seen in the way New Labour managed the economy by prioritising inflation, capping public spending and giving a greater role to markets – including privatisation - but also in the way it sought to achieve social justice,

"The [New] Labour Government seeks to tackle inequality not by alleviating poverty and reducing income differentials via taxation and redistributing welfare spending, but by providing recurrent equality of opportunity for individuals to learn and earn throughout their working lives" (Hodgson and Spours, 1999, p.11).

Labour's shift from the politics of the collective to the primacy of the individual amounts to an illogical, contradictory rejection of its own political history, a history that illustrates the power of collective agency with the specific aim of achieving a 'tolerable' society. Adult education literature of the 90's necessarily preoccupies itself with this political shift and what it portends, particularly for socially purposeful adult education which 'old' Labour

supported, acknowledging the crucial role it played in the lives of many of the very first Labour Party politicians. Blinded by their anticipation of a new Labour Government, educational commentators entered into an initial but prolonged uncritical embrace with New Labour: failing to realise or acknowledge the extent to which neo-liberalism now informed Labour Party politics. By degrees this became impossible to ignore or apologise for, and critical commentary sharpened, eventually rejecting the 'Third Way' as little more than a continuation of the Conservative legacy (Hodgson and Spours, 1999, p.12). Indeed, such was the degree of consensus between New Labour and the Conservatives, Peter Riddell of The Times commented that, "An economist from Mars would conclude that the same Government had been in charge throughout the second half of the 90's" (Riddell, n.d. cited in Kavanagh, 2003).

In the first half of the 90's the Conservatives had been extremely active in educational policy, passing no fewer than seven Education Acts,<sup>8</sup> and although the bulk of it targeted schools with a traditional Tory emphasis on basic skills and vocationalism, some of it was aimed at the post-compulsory sector for example, 'Education and Training for the 21st Century' (1991); The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) and 'Modern Apprenticeships' (1994). Of these, the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) warrants specific comment, as this Act is widely understood to have marketised post-compulsory education and transformed it into a business, forcing providers to compete fiercely for funds and deliver on very specific, often vocational educational objectives (Jackson, 1995, pp.188-191). Schedule 2 of the Act is especially significant for the adult sector – particularly for those practising socially purposeful education and is worth detailing here.

The descriptions of courses of further education referred to in section 3 (1) of this Act are the following,

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<sup>8</sup> The Education (Schools) Act (1992) which established the inspectorate, OFSTED; the Education Act (1993) based on the Dearing Review of the National Curriculum in the same year; the Education Act (1994) establishing the Teacher Training Agency; the Education Act (1996) a consolidation of all previous education acts since 1944; the School Inspections Act (1996) consolidating previous legislation on school inspections, and the Education Act of 1997.

- a) a course which prepares students to obtain a vocational qualification which is, or falls within a class, for the time being approved for the purposes of this sub paragraph by the Secretary of state,
- b) a course which prepares students to qualify for-
  - i) the General Certificate of Education, or
  - ii) the General Certificate of Education at Advanced Level or Advanced Supplementary Level (including Special Papers),
- c) a course for the time being approved for the purposes of this sub-paragraph by the Secretary of state which prepares students for entry to a course of higher education,
- d) a course which prepares students for entry to another course falling within paragraphs (a) to (c) above,
- e) a course for basic literacy in English,
- f) a course to improve the knowledge of English of those for whom English is not the language spoken at home,
- g) a course to teach the basic principles of mathematics,
- h) in relation to Wales, a course for proficiency or literacy in Welsh,
- i) a course to teach independent living and communication skills to persons having learning difficulties which prepares them for entry to another course falling within paragraphs (d) to (h) above.

(<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpaga/1992/13/schedule/2/paragraph/p8>)

According to Fieldhouse (1996, p.105ff), Schedule 2 introduced tensions to the post-compulsory sector based on artificial divisions between vocational and non-vocational adult learning. It also emphasised individual personal development at the expense of collective social action, polarising the debate about whether adult education should be part of public or

voluntary provision. These divisions, resting crucially upon certification, have not only remained in education but intensified, resulting in non-schedule 2 adult education being regarded as 'recreational'; making it vulnerable to claims for state support (O' Rourke, 1995, p.113). The heady rhetoric of New Labour's renaissance for lifelong learning in the Learning Age (1998) might have addressed the issue, but this singular departure in educational policy never amounted to anything more than a Green Paper, quickly forgotten amongst the priorities of the Moser Report (1999); the Skills for Life Strategy (2001) and the Leitch Review of Skills (2005) which all provided a compelling economic rationale for funding what Schedule 2 of the FHE Act promoted, that is to say, adult basic skills and vocational courses and qualifications.

This course did not alter once New Labour was in power, but escalated, as the new Learning and Skills Act (2000), which replaced the FHE Act (1992), had regional powers to both direct funds and inspect adult education, re-invigorating the focus on low level vocational qualifications and adult basic skills (Skills for Life). The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) increasingly supported by positivist quality assurance frameworks such as OSTED and the Adult Learning Inspectorate, set off a 'poverty of performativity' (Fielding, 2001, p.152) that came to dominate educational discourse in the 90's and Noughties, narrowing educational debate to attend to 'what works' (Hargreaves, 1997, p.203) within the highly questionable notion of 'educational productivity' (Fielding, 2001, p.9). Marked by a lack of sociological theorising about disadvantage and inequality, it became routinely assumed in educational discourse that, "Learning outcomes can be directly and unambiguously linked to inputs (viz teaching)" (Willmott, 2003, p.141), making New Labour's education policy overly, "Technicist and deeply regressive" (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000, p.31).

The cycle of positivist performativity which restored a 'banking' model of education to state schools was now effectively being introduced into adult education through the linked functions of funding and inspections, making it more like school by replacing dialogic forms of learning with standardised curricula, and paving the way for New Managerialism

and the audit culture to be introduced in adult education. By the Chief Inspector's own admission, the impact of this on adult and continuing education caused a fundamental shift in emphasis from the 'leisure' offer of the past, "To provision designed to play its part in taking forward the Government's skills strategy" (ALI, 2005, p.29). Taken as a whole, these developments escalated the standardisation of knowledge and its compartmentalisation, leading to the rise of modularity and the use of credits: essential components of a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) that emerged in the late 90's (later evolving to become the Qualifications and Credit Framework).<sup>9</sup>

This development is of major significance to adult education, but particularly to the WEA which was structured as an educational movement because, as Young points out,

"Introducing an NQF based on levels, standards and outcomes is not a superficial reform that leaves most existing education and training provision to go on as before...it involves a complete change, not only in the way qualifications have traditionally been organized...but also in the deeply embedded practices that underpin them" (Young, 2005, p.8).

The strengths of a National Qualifications Framework, or so it was argued at the time, lay in its flexibility and accessibility that could offer adult learners or 'low achievers' the opportunity to learn in bite sized chunks and, in theory, progress from entry level through to higher education and professional levels, thereby enhancing their employability. The NQF's additional appeal, especially in the UK, was its compatibility with the dominant neo-liberal ideas about life-long learning and its emphasis on the individual's responsibility for learning (Young, 2005, p.6),

"The UK's market-led system of lifelong learning relies to a large extent on voluntary individual initiative and willingness to invest. Not only does the voluntary system eschew statutory embedding of rights and obligations; it maintains low levels of public investment" (Green, n.d. cited in Hodgson, 2000, pp.46-47).

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<sup>9</sup> The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) was introduced in November 2008.

Throughout the 90's the question about who should pay for adult learning, especially the kind that lay outside the scope of the Government's objectives, was left unanswered, leaving the promise of a new inclusive learning society unfulfilled (Tuckett, 1996, p.57), and the fate of liberal adult education in the balance. By the mid Noughties the situation had become critical with one million learning places at risk of being lost, prompting NIACE to launch the 'BIG Conversation' (2006) and ask those who recognised the value of lifelong learning to consider a 'stakeholder' approach that might secure adult education a future. (NIACE, The Case for Adult Learning, Access all areas, November, 2006, p.5). According to the UNESCO world conference on adult education in 1997, the debate about who should pay was not confined to the UK but part of a wider international experience that witnessed state funded 'second chance' adult education, "Being replaced with an employer driven system that individualise[d] adult learners and [re]define[d] them as human capital" (Foley, 2000, p.124). This did not only affect 'second chance' adult education but further education, where training schemes were criticised for being little more than,

"[A]n inculcation of work discipline (punctuality, following of routines, rule observance) and narrow job-specific techniques rather than the training of genuine skills and the sponsoring of judgement and critical independence" (Fryer, 1990, cited in Simon 1992, pp.281-2).

Higher education was affected too, as universities and polytechnics of the early 90's struggled to open up to the working class in, "The face of the most serious attempts this century to make higher education a commodity and turn it into an illiberal training for social discipline" (McIlroy, 1990b, p.236). The political aim to restructure the entire sector is evident in the examples of New Labour's educational policy, (see the NCIHE Review of Higher Education<sup>10</sup>(1996); the Kennedy Review of Further Education (1997); the Learning Age (1998); the Moser Report (1999) and the Skills for Life Strategy (2001); and the Leitch Review of Skills (2005) which did, "Not solely advance a vocational or human capital rationale" but *did* have, "A distinctive business orientation" (Greaves, Hill and

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<sup>10</sup> National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education: also known as the Dearing Report.

Maisura, 2007), and an overriding concern with how to finance the widening participation agenda.

However, the attempt to widen participation, an essential cornerstone of New Labour's 'Third Way' and its principle method of achieving social justice, further marketised education without any of the expected compensations, escalating the same trends that characterised Conservative education policy in the 80's and early 90's which produced, "A culture at odds with widening participation, social inclusion and lifelong learning" (Lucas, McDonald, and Taubman, 1999, cited in Hodgson, 2000, p.154). This, according to Hill (2006) merely allowed, "The private sector to take a stranglehold of state services" and transform what was once regarded as an essential public good into a private luxury (Kurlich, 1992, cited in Heaney, 1996). Carter and O'Neil (1995) saw this changing relationship between politics, Government and education in complex westernized, post-industrialized societies, as 'the new orthodoxy' characterised by the following elements,

- Improving the national economy by tightening the relationship between schooling, employment, productivity and trade
- Student outcomes in employment related skills
- Attaining direct control over curriculum and content
- Reducing the costs of Government education
- Increasing market input into education

(Carter and O'Neil, 1995, cited in Fielding, 2001 p.49).

The implications of this are of concern to those who believe that, "Public education contributes to equal opportunities and is essential to social progress" (Education International, 1999, cited in Griffin, 2000) because it is recognised that this sort of approach, "Only work[s] for people who are actively seeking access and opportunities" (O'Rourke, 1995, p.111) and what is more, is, "Less likely than other models to lead to an

inclusive learning society" (Green, n.d. cited in Hodgson, 2000, p.47). There is considerable data to support this claim, most notably from Machin and Vignoles (2006), Coffield (2001), Whitty, Power, and Halpin (1998), Bynner and Parsons (1997) and Sargant et al. (1997) who have all found that those most likely to be in education and training are adults who can easily access and afford it, and as I have already pointed out in chapter one: the more education and training these adults access and benefit from, the more likely they are to continue doing so throughout their lives, widening the inequalities gap further and contributing to the learning divide in Britain (Sargant et al., 1997, 2002).

According to research by Sargant et al. (1997), 81% of the correspondents who were not participating in education or training cited reasons associated with their class; gender; age; educational experience; confidence and geography, lending weight to O'Rourke's claims that marketised education fails to deal effectively with student difference (O'Rourke, 1995, p.113). By failing to distinguish between contingent and necessary relations and the stratified nature of social reality, marketised education homogenises students and the learning experience which, as Scott (2000) points out, "Cannot help but provide support for an agenda which emphasises control, prediction and the rejection of a holistic view of education" (Scott, 2000, quoted in Willmott, 2003, p.139).

This positivist conception of education, advanced through a relentless focus on standards, has enabled both Conservative and New Labour Governments to re-frame what is of educational value, and to control the *what* and *how* of teaching through the inspectorate's 'uniform metric' (Corbett, 2008, p.1). Created to measure educational performance using competencies and outcomes, this metric is ill-equipped to judge emancipatory educational methodologies because it, "Presupposes a conception of people as passive sensors of given facts" (Bhaskar, 1989, pp.49-50) and not as potentially powerful agents. On the other hand, it can be argued that with the introduction of RARPA<sup>11</sup> informal, emancipatory

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<sup>11</sup> Recognising And Recording Progress and Achievement in non-accredited learning.

kinds of adult education are not subject to the 'uniform metric' but an alternative form of assessment which is better suited to,

"Acknowledge the diversity and interests of its learners, as well as take account of the wider needs of communities and employers in identifying and measuring non-accredited work."

(<http://www.niace.org.uk/projects/RARPA/default.htm>)

Yet this is questionable, as upon further investigation RARPA does not in fact deviate from any other competency based framework as it shares the same fundamental concerns associated with formal accredited learning, evidencing success using the quantitative measures of achievement, attainment<sup>12</sup> and progression. It could even be argued that RARPA, whilst enabling non-accredited practice at least to be funded, has in the end allowed in roads to be made into a sphere of learning that, up until recently, has resisted regulation: informal learning. This would undoubtedly compromise the, "Vital latitude of informality of adult learning" (O'Rourke, 1995, p.111) as attempts would almost certainly codify and reify its practices, posing an existential threat to what is possibly, the last remaining opportunity for adult educators to pursue alternative and emancipatory educational methodologies.

Unsurprisingly, as the notion of competencies began to dominate education throughout the 90's and the Noughties, there was a growing application of business and accounting techniques, giving rise to what Clarke et al. call the 'New Managerialism' in education (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Clarke et al., 1994). This, in turn, has further paved the way for another powerful and closely related discourse: professionalism, which the Aston School identifies by the degree to which an organisation is characterised by:

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<sup>12</sup> Achievement is assessed in terms of students meeting their learning goals, which are formalised within a learning contract between the teacher and student at the start of the course. Attainment refers to the successful completion of the course and is evidenced by a qualification, whereas progression denotes the movement to a higher level of learning or suitable employment.

1. specialisation – division of labour
2. standardisation – of procedures, roles and so on
3. formalisation – of communication procedures
4. centralisation – of authority
5. configuration – the shape of the organisation in terms of control
6. flexibility – the ability to respond to the forces of change

(Pugh et al., 1972, cited in Jarvis, 1993, p.57).

Professionalisation has proven to be a vital tool in the ideological restructuring of adult education, as the replacement of adult literacy with 'Skills for Life' in 2000 illustrates. This revolutionised adult literacy and numeracy teaching by bringing in a new structured, competency based, standardised national curriculum, along with standardised screening, testing and diagnostic tools, as well as a suite of qualifications that were part of the then, partially developed National Framework of Qualifications. These developments put an end to traditional, informal, generic practices by separating literacy, numeracy and ESOL<sup>13</sup> into distinct subject areas and demanding a level of formal, continuous assessment and monitoring, which in turn, necessitated teachers to top up their qualifications or retrain as either literacy, numeracy or ESOL specialists.

Compliance to re-professionalise was assured through the new Adult Learning Inspectorate whose remit extended to the, "Training of or for teachers, lecturers, trainers or other persons engaged in the provision of education or training" (Learning and Skills Act 2000, paragraph 53, clause 2). The new legitimising bodies needed to support this radical restructure increased administration, confirming what Jarvis (1993, s.4) had revealed back in the early 90's: that marketised, outcomes based education is inherently bureaucratic. Moreover, these performative trends towards bureaucratisation and professionalisation in education were further escalated by the emerging National Qualifications Framework, which subordinated the judgement of teachers to a proliferation

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<sup>13</sup> English for Speakers of Other Languages.

of Awarding Bodies whose functions of testing and certification were vital to outcomes based education and the NQF (Young, 2005, p.29).

This is a worrisome development for any teacher as it estranges them further from the things that motivate them: the subject and student, and because it communicates what many professionals perhaps already realise, that the performance culture of rewards and penalties is quite simply the refusal to trust them (ibid). When translated into the context of socially purposeful adult education, or more specifically Community Education, these powerful discourses result in a complete 'paradigm shift' which substitutes function for purpose (Mae and Shaw, 1995, p.207-208). Stripped of its intellectual, social and moral debates adult education praxis becomes reduced to a series of unproblematical tasks, creating a theoretical vacuum and impoverishing practitioners as they transform into 'technicians or clerks' without any real understanding of the greater purpose of their radical educational agenda (ibid pp.208 - 210).

However, Chappell, Gonczi and Hager contend, this is a narrow view of competence-based education that is marked by a) an over emphasis on technical task skills – leading to the omission of general social, intellectual and emotional abilities from competency descriptions in courses; b) the over-simplification of course descriptions that, whilst enabling measurement, make it unlikely for complex processes to be captured; c) the insistence that there are single acceptable outcomes and single paths to acceptable outcomes - over emphasising behaviour at the expense of cognition; d) the objectification of performance, separating the performer from the performance, and e) the raising of the individual learner above the group, as the process of learning is understood as beginning and ending in the acquisition of prescribed competencies (2000, cited in Foley, 2000, pp.191-194). Chappell, Gonczi and Hager believe a broader view exists that builds on the humanist rather than the positivist tradition, adopting an integrative and holistic approach to competency standards in education that directly contributes to improving access and equity in adult education (ibid, pp.195-204).

Yet Professor Young's (2005) review of competence based education frameworks shows that there is little reason to support these claims - especially in the UK - which adopted a highly prescriptive, positivist model with a preference for 'slower learners' to be educated in 'bite sized' chunks which, according to Young, has actually resulted in adults becoming, "Even less able to engage in more structured learning" (ibid, p.25). He is sceptical too about the redistributive claims of the NQF in accrediting the informal, experiential and tacit dimensions of learning and knowledge, suggesting they have been vastly exaggerated as competency based approaches based on outcomes,

"Cannot grasp the nature of bodies of knowledge and the complex processes we describe as transmission, pedagogy and curriculum through which they are acquired and renewed" (Young, 2005, p.33).

Although Mae and Shaw's critique relates specifically to the impact of the 1992 FHE Act upon Community Education in the early 90's, their illustrative critique goes beyond charting the devastating impact of marketisation and the performance culture on that area of praxis, to communicate more generally, the relative ease with which one of the most important ideological sites for the development and reproduction of critical adult education was reconfigured into an instrumental, competency based approach. In targeting the legitimising structures that endorse and validate educational activity, for example CeVe<sup>14</sup> and routing its funding via a professional quango, they show how 'really useful knowledge' literally disappeared from adult education – without challenge.

The use of quangoes to steer education policy at an operational level is an effective tactic that has been deployed by the Conservatives and New Labour alike, as it renders power invisible - and as Melucci highlights: power which is not recognised because it is not visible, is not negotiable (1993, pp.186-187) which may explain why community educators failed to mount a challenge. Alternatively one might say - indeed as McIlroy (1995, p.161) does about the restructuring of the trade union movement in the 80's - that adult educators failed to defend the tradition because they were content with becoming technicians, or that

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<sup>14</sup> Community Education Validation and Endorsement (Scotland).

in readiness of impending marketisation, providers were happy to reorganise their provision so that they could take an early advantage and secure their niche. However, Mae and Shaw conclude, somewhat pragmatically, that had providers chosen any other course of action other than to accept the changes that were taking place, they would have run the risk of being prohibited from practising altogether - a fate that befell Edinburgh University when the funding quango called the Scottish Community Education Council, rejected its Diploma/MSC qualification in Community and Adult Education (1995, p.211).

Stranded within these structures, adult educators of the 90's and Noughties found themselves, "Caught up in market logic and bureaucratic jargon" (Giroux, 1995, p.214) and increasingly emasculated - prompting radical adult educator Jane Thompson to ask - just one year after the FHE Act was introduced,

"Does anyone, apart from other dinosaurs, discuss 'really useful knowledge' critical intelligence, consciousness-raising? Or reflect upon, with any degree of precision, what it's all about politically? For what purpose are we constructing this Benetton-style solution to educational provision? At what cost in terms of lost community and the disappearance of collective action?" (Thompson, 1993).

One might think the WEA was hit hard by the educational policies of the 90's, however, thanks to generous Further Education Funding Council funds which financed 60% of the Association's work, the WEA in fact enjoyed a period of rapid expansion at this time even, though 70% of its provision was unaccredited and classified as Non-Schedule 2 work. Other factors attributable to the WEA's expansion lay in its partnership activity, for example the successful 'Return to Learn' scheme between the WEA and UNISON which ran from 1995 – 2000, and the growth in women's groups in the mid to late 90's (Fryer, 1990, p.292). Indeed, WEA optimism at the time was such that its president confidently predicted continued expansion, ensuring the WEA would remain the largest national voluntary provider of adult education in the UK.

Yet, tensions soon began to emerge for the WEA as the full impact of the FHE Act (1992) began to take effect, resulting in, "More and more of its work [being] done for others, who are not members and whom existing members do not see as sharers in an inherited WEA project" (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.197). Moreover, the WEA increasingly found itself delivering Schedule 2 adult education that had, "Very little relevance to WEA traditional roles" (ibid, p.195). Furthermore, its incorporation into the FE sector brought with it increased scrutiny, ultimately weakening the movement as it became a target setting body rather than an organisation led by its own members, obliging the WEA to,

"[C]ompete for contracts and 'service level agreements' within the further education sector and 'speak the language of measurable outcomes, accreditation, quality assurance and output related funding.' It faced the fundamental problem of reconciling quite different philosophies of education within a common framework of funding accreditation" (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.195).

Apart from the strong centralising tendencies of education policy impacting on the WEA during this time, an incident involving an employment tribunal in 1991<sup>15</sup> forced the Association to become a single organisation and centralise its operations (Doyle, 2003, pp.25-26). This structural change directly affected the agency of Tutor Organisers who, under the traditional WEA structure of autonomous Branches and Districts, had been able to source and manage their own finances; take decisions best suited to local sensitivities; and deliver the WEA mission according to their own interpretation, resources and skills. Re-routing the funds and therefore power, through a single body: the National Association, changed all this, emasculating the WEA's key agents and weakening those Districts that had hitherto fully exercised and enjoyed such independence. According to Fieldhouse (1996, p.197), the integration and centralisation of the WEA made a nonsense of Mansbridge's original vision which was, after all, for the Association to be an educational movement run by its students, and not scrutinised or led from above as increasingly became the case. The WEA's new legal status also prompted wider

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<sup>15</sup> In 1991 a tribunal ruled the WEA to be a single employer, putting an end to the independent funding of Districts.

structural changes to the organisation as the Welsh and Northern Ireland Districts withdrew, fearing integration would erode the WEA structure and its democratic principles. This left WEA England and three Scottish Districts (before they too eventually merged to become WEA Scotland). Doyle (2003, p.27) and Roberts (2003, pp.265-266) however reflect more positively on the 90's and Noughties, seeing this era as one of increased 'creative exploitation' and experimentation by the WEA, where the rise in local partnerships spawned important adult education activity that led to major developments in socially purposeful education.

'Second Chance to Learn' was an example of this 'creative exploitation' - fusing the successful community development initiatives in Merseyside of the 70's, with the WEA's experience and expertise in informal and trade union education, to deliver short courses targeted at the unwaged and part time workers (Doyle, 2003, p.53). Its success paved the way for a much larger partnership between UNISON and the WEA, resulting in the 'Return to Learn' scheme, launched nationally in 1996 to, "Address the needs of the most vulnerable and least educationally qualified in the workplace" (ibid, p.66). 'Return to Learn' was an accredited course with a broad curriculum developed by WEA Tutor Organisers rather than the unions and was so successful that it spread from its beginnings in the Midlands to Northwest England, then eventually to reach all the regions that were covered by the new 'super' union: UNISON.

Unlike much of the WEA's provision at the time, these courses were considered 'measurable' under Schedule 2 of the FHE Act (1992) and therefore qualified for its favourable tariff. As funds for the WEA's traditional programmes shrank, financial partnerships proliferated, and according to research commissioned by the WEA in 1999, there were some 1,600 formal educational partnerships across the Association at a local and district level (WEA, A Century of Learning, 2003a, p.16). Through these arrangements the WEA was able to reconnect with its target audience and realise the organisational mission, which throughout the 90's and Noughties was to, "Promote adult

education based on democratic principles in its organisation and practice, through the participation of its voluntary members" (WEA, 2008, p.5).

Despite this qualified success, the drawbacks involved in partnership working often resulted in short-term, externally-funded, joint programmes which were heavily criticised by WEA insiders because they not only failed to involve students in the wider voluntary movement, they increased financial and structural vulnerabilities within the Association too, which of course undermined its claims to being truly independent. On the other hand, one might argue that its partnership arrangements (especially with the unions), kept the WEA afloat and connected to its organisational mission, allowing access to both a stable income and some of the most disadvantaged members of society: low paid union members.

On the face of it then, it appears that the WEA's success and organisational growth during this time was chiefly attributable to the new *educational* role of the trade unions in the mid-late 90's, and the generous funds which accompanied the introduction of its learning representatives (ULR's). These learning 'reps' were a crucial part of New Labour's strategy for achieving social justice, a strategy which was supported by the findings of a study into the 'Return to Learn' programme of 1995 that reported 80% of its students to be women; 42% part-time employees; 76% on incomes less than £11,000 per annum and 91% having left school at 16 or earlier (Roberts, 2003, p.269). These new ULR functions, which involved, "Widening provision, guidance, childcare facilities and financial support towards tuition fees and study costs," were not accepted by all: considered by some a diversion from the more traditional activities that centred on negotiating workers' rights, benefits and pay (Payne, 2001, pp.386-7).

However, Hake (1999, cited in Payne, 2001) believes this modernisation of the unions was necessary in order to kick-start a much needed process of recovery after such a prolonged period of anti-unionism, but also because the unions had to be more adept in assisting their members face the challenges of global capitalism, which was making

increasingly technicist demands on the labour force (Giddens, 1990; 1991, cited in Payne, 2001). Competing interpretations of the modernisation agenda present it as either being a response to changing economic, social and political conditions (Hake), or an example of the continuing penetration of neo-liberal economic ideas of New Labour from 1997-2011 (McIlroy, 1995), but whatever the interpretation, it is clear that as a result of this new role the unions stumbled upon an effective recruitment tool (Payne, 2001).

Machin (2000) believes this should not be dismissed lightly because, in addition to the intentional political attacks on organised labour which had eroded union membership, there were other mitigating factors: the decline in manufacturing; the growth in service sector employment; the growth of non-unionised Small and Medium Employers; and the growing peripheral labour market of low paid and insecure employment which left a shrinking union movement with serious recruitment problems. This was exacerbated by an increasingly individualistic, alienated and fragmented society where,

"Selves are no longer bounded by traditions, but become subject to self-monitoring, innovation and change. The self and self-identity become a focus for change and development. [T]he reflexivity of the project is radicalised by the amount of information available, the media through which it is constituted and disseminated, and the range of options over certain choices that can and indeed have to be made. However, the very reflexivity upon which, it is suggested, late modernity is grounded means that the choices confronting people are themselves ambiguous and insecure. There is too much information and there are many choices. The options available are many and puzzling, making life planning an integral component of existence. The situation necessitates risks, yet demands trust in others and ourselves. We require experts and expertise to help us mediate the choices" (Edwards and Payne, 1997, cited in Payne, 2001, p.389ff).

According to Doyle (2003), these profound changes will increasingly,

"Challenge the certainties we live by...causing a redefinition of the working class and those at the bottom of the labour market or at its margins, [to be] the most vulnerable economically, socially and educationally"(Doyle, 2003, p.80).

Accompanying these vulnerabilities, he continues, are the, "Poverty of expectation and esteem, fuelled for many by 'failure' at school which are illustrated through poor literacy and numeracy" (ibid). This may in some way provide a rationale for the WEA's level of Skills for Life provision, but although basic literacy and numeracy have always featured strongly in English adult education, Skills for Life - as it became in the Noughties - is altogether a different prospect from the literacy campaigns of the 70's that Fieldhouse champions (1996, p.393ff). Indeed, its prescriptive rigor with its sights on achieving economic efficiency for the nation could undo the WEA, forcing upon them a deficit model of education that would not only escalate the trend of professionalisation, but leave them with burdensome levels of bureaucracy to boot!

Despite these dangers, one might argue that the WEA - *because* of its expertise in engaging vulnerable adults - is arguably best suited to delivering Skills for Life.

However, despite the WEA's success in this, ALI has poured a 'heap of ordure' on the WEA (Beckett, 2004) chastising the Association for its learners' poor attendance, punctuality and attainment (ALI, 2004, pp.9-10). This modern take on what constitutes 'success' in adult education contrasts sharply when set against the attitudes of policy makers in the 70's who understood that,

"Insistence upon regular times of meeting, the routines of enrolment and registration and attendance, minimum numbers, the charging of fees in advance (or at all) and formal class teaching will often destroy any chance of successful educational penetration into these sectors of the population" (DES, 1973, cited in Lovett, 1975, pp.144-145).

Apart from illustrating just how much educational policy has altered over the last 40 years, this also reveals something more fundamental at work: how policy – shaped by the dominant discourses of the age - is informed by the dominant interests of that age, which is vitally important to consider when looking at what notions of quality are in operation, for as Carvel reminds us,

"Quality is a subjective category of description and its meaning derives from its point of articulation. There are questions about who defines quality, and indeed, whose interests it represents. Furthermore, multi-dimensional concepts such as quality, are often reduced to binaries, such as effective/failing organisations. There are important questions about what type of support is appropriate for failing institutions, or whether, indeed, failure is merely a social construction – a totem to assuage the fears of consumers and to demonstrate state power over standards" (Carvel, 1999, quoted in Hodgson, 2000, p.92).

Against ALI's positivist concepts of quality, the WEA failed its 2004 inspection and was obliged by the Learning and Skills Act (2000) to act on the inspectorate's recommendations<sup>16</sup> which meant introducing alternative management systems (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.196) as well as, "Rebalanc[ing] the curriculum...which will significantly increase the proportions of workplace activity and targeted provision" (ALI, 2005, p.18). With over half the WEA's income coming from one single LSC contract in the mid Noughties (Beckett, 2004, p.2) the WEA had little option but to comply, bringing to an end the traditional structure of WEA and with it, the quintessential role of the WEA Tutor Organiser.

Some WEA insiders welcomed this, believing the 19th century structure to be archaic and part of the reason why the WEA experienced difficulties in engaging with the working class in the latter part of the 20th century (as well as in the 21st century). However, in its defence, the original federal structure of the WEA at least reflected the level at which communities functioned, acknowledging the similar economic and cultural experiences that those

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<sup>16</sup> Paragraph 58, clause 2 states the provider must, "Make a written statement of the action which he proposes to take in the light of the report and the period within which he proposes to take it."

geographical communities shared. It also assisted the Tutor Organisers, the WEA's key agents, to realise the organisational mission, and to develop and deliver 'really useful knowledge' to local prospective WEA students. In this way the WEA structure was directly and inextricably linked to the agency of its Tutor Organisers and students, and once engaged, their continuing participation and developing agency would feed back into the WEA, fuelling the voluntary movement in turn. As Doyle and Lanch point out, (Doyle, 2003, pp.86-87) it was precisely because of its historic, democratic structure that the WEA was able carry out its distinctive style of adult education and thereby fulfil its organisational mission.

Therefore the radical restructure of 2004 raises some important questions: how can the WEA support and sustain voluntary members' involvement beyond the classroom? (Doyle, 2003, p.85ff). How can the WEA ensure its governance is representative? And against a backdrop of increasingly instrumental state directed education policy, "How does the WEA build consistency and coherence within a framework responsive to locally identified need?" (ibid, p.83). Further related questions to consider are: how has this restructure affected the special relationship between the tutor and student? And have the increasing demands of professionalism and managerialism in education triggered a complete shift in the Association from a democratic movement to a fully-fledged service provider?

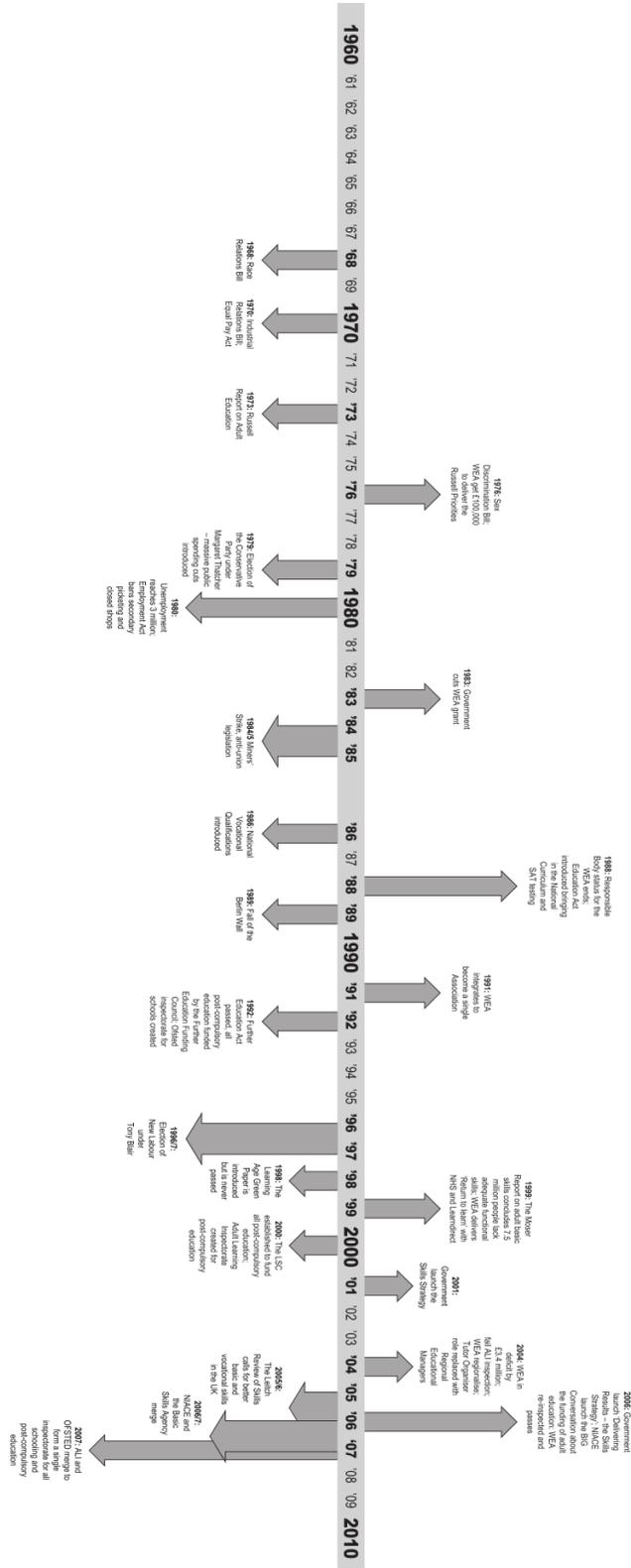
Amongst these unresolved questions, is the more immediate issue of how to protect the shrinking space in which the practices of alternative adult education are supposed to occur. Jarvis (1987) already declared some time ago, that time was not on the side of Tawney's kind of adult education, and so the ability of the WEA to survive and continue to deliver its historic mission, will ultimately depend on its ability to respond effectively and address these challenges. Doyle admits however, "It is an intriguing characteristic of the Association that it is often more comfortable in meeting external challenges than addressing internal issues" (2003, p.83), a theme which I take up in the following chapter.

## Summary

In this chapter I chart and analyse the effects of a changing educational landscape which has shifted adult education away from the welfare model of the 70's towards a highly prescriptive, individualist form of marketised education that has been designed to deliver the Government's skills strategy. Increasingly interventionist, the state has targeted its twin functions of funding and inspection to radically transform educational practices, but more importantly trigger a complete ideological restructuring of independent organisations to ensure their compliance. Under the banner of quality and standards in education, the New Right has used the powerful discourses of managerialism and professionalism to re-frame what is of educational value, giving rise to a narrow skills agenda that is evidenced by competencies, and upon which a National Framework of Qualifications has been built. This development has homogenised teaching and learning experiences, standardising education in order to make it a marketable commodity.

As NFQ's depend on positivist concepts of knowledge and assessment, they are best served by inspectorates that perform to the same, legitimising a particular definition of success and quality. The pervasive performativity of these processes ensure ideological retrenchment across the sector, so much so that organisations found operating to alternative concepts of quality are deemed 'illegitimate' or 'failures' and become forced, through the legal framework of the inspectorate, to realign structures and practices appropriately. This changing educational landscape has affected the WEA directly and I illustrate, through the direction of policy over the last 40 years, how the WEA has moved from being endorsed by the state and supported to deliver priorities that reflected a broad educational agenda, to a position where the WEA, along with other providers, is now forced to compete in a quasi-marketised environment for contracts that often reflect exclusively economic, educational objectives as expressed by the Leitch Report of 2005.

Figure 1: WEA Timeline





## Chapter Three: A Critical History of the WEA

Chapter two illustrated the impact of external factors and Government policy upon the WEA's identity. In this chapter, I investigate some of the 'internal issues' (Doyle, 2003, p.83) that have shaped and directed the Association. I settle on two tensions to frame this selective history which have been hotly debated, both in and outside of the WEA throughout its organisational life. The first tension centres on whether the WEA can claim to genuinely provide 'working class' education, and the second looks into how Government funds affect the WEA's autonomy; which is of interest to this study as it is useful to know if the relationship between funding and autonomy strengthens or weakens the capacity of the WEA to involve the working class in its core educational programmes. Deploying a critical realist approach that acknowledges the potential power of dynamic contextual forces, I explore how these two tensions permeate through the development of the WEA's provision and discover that they have always been with the WEA since its origins over a century ago. This indicates the tensions are more than internal issues, indeed they are the carriers of something deeper and more fundamental: the contradiction between the organisation and the state itself, and as such may not be resolved by the WEA.

This critical history adds a new and useful dimension to the existing debate about the WEA. It introduces a conceptual analytical framework that can handle the complexities of identity formation, which continually shift according to the spacio-temporal potentialities of organisational and individual agency. The approach is therefore perfectly suited to take account of competing adult education histories, evolving organisational identities, and conflicting individual experience without stripping meaning or understanding from the focus of research. It also allows a reappraisal of the WEA that resists conflating the richness of its special journey into either an uncritical hagiography that depicts the WEA as the noble survivor outside the educational mainstream, or alternatively, as part of the establishment and a moderating force on independent working class education and action.

Archer's approach focuses on the potential power of individual and organisational agency that, under the right conditions, appears to revive the radical claims of the WEA and bring its mission to life. This critical realist perspective also imparts a deeper understanding as to how and why key agents act as they do, and in turn, how their individual agency informs the highly complex life of an organisation; shaping its identity in a particular way as it evolves with an ever changing membership in what is often a volatile climate. Thus, when considering the WEA's identity it might be more accurate to suggest that it is an organisation that is not so much 'in crisis' as 'in contradiction.' To show how such tensions and contradictions have played out across WEA provision over time, as well as provide critical commentary on the history of the WEA and the impact of the developing Association on working class education, is a complex undertaking and for this reason I have chosen to structure the discussion around a diagram that, I hope, aids the following critique.

**Figure 2: Core WEA programme development from 1908 – 1970's**

<b>1908</b> <b>Liberal Programme (later the General Programme)</b> (Tutorial class)	<b>1919</b> <b>Workplace Programme</b> (WETUC till 1963)	<b>1970's</b> <b>Community Programme</b>
<b>Educational focus:</b> History, politics and Economics	<b>Educational focus:</b> Workplace issues, stewarding and negotiation skills	<b>Educational focus:</b> Women's studies Engagement activities
<b>Course length:</b> 3 years, unaccredited	<b>Course length:</b> Short: Day/Weekly	<b>Course length:</b> Short: Day/Weekly
<b>Organised:</b> WEA Branch Jointly with Oxford University	<b>Organised:</b> Jointly with unions	<b>Organised:</b> WEA District
<b>Students targeted:</b> Working class men	<b>Students targeted:</b> Working class via unions	<b>Students targeted:</b> Women, minorities, the working class
<b>Key agents:</b> A. Mansbridge Bishop Stepney R.H Tawney R. Williams Government University Extension Movement	<b>Key agents:</b> J. Mactavish A. Pugh G.D.H Cole Unions	<b>Key agents:</b> New Tutor Organisers Social movements

Using this framework, I focus on some of the contradictions which surface when exploring the WEA as an educational provider for the working class, and using a critical historical perspective, reveal that the development of the WEA's educational provision has often been informed by a *partial and static* understanding of who it has defined as 'working class'. This contrasts with Skeggs' definition outlined earlier in this thesis, which suggests that class is always in flux (Skeggs, 2004, p.3). It is for these reasons that the WEA has only ever engaged a particular section of the working class – and even within this subsection of the working class - has experienced difficulties; blaming societal change and the increasing heterogeneity of the working class following the Second World War for poor levels of engagement (Doyle, 2003, p.22, p.35, p.47; Fieldhouse, 1996, p.185; Roberts, 2003, pp.154-55, p.169).

However, an alternative critical view suggests that the WEA was struggling long before this<sup>17</sup> and not just because a more heterogeneous working class became 'hard to reach' but more so perhaps, because the working class were not *interested* in WEA courses. Arguably, it is this lack of interest that really motivated the WEA to develop and periodically adapt its provision which, as analysis reveals, attracted a completely different section of the working class each time it did so. This perspective leads to a certain qualification of the WEA's early 'success' - particularly of its tutorial classes which only ever involved a *tiny* fraction of the 'working class' - and thus begs the question, why the WEA continued with a form of provision that, despite much acclaim, actually failed to meet the organisational mission. I address this directly when I explore the contradictions that emerge through the second tension - which focuses on how state funding affects the WEA's autonomy - however the salient points to make here are: the WEA has struggled from the outset to attract a range of people who might self-identify as working class, and when it has worked selectively with organisations that have claimed to represent the working class, these organisations have not been constituted from people who fully make up that class.

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<sup>17</sup> G.D.H Cole questioned the direction of the WEA as early as 1924, (Doyle, 2003, p.21) and in 1953 WEA General Secretary Ernest Green published a pamphlet entitled: "Why this apathy?"

The WEA's claim to be a genuine working class adult educational provider throws up other associated issues about the adult curriculum and what constitutes 'really useful knowledge'. Referring to figure 2, it is clear how the WEA's understanding of this has changed over time: shifting from academic tutorial classes at the turn of the 19th century to trade union education in the early to mid-20th century, before the appearance of the Community Programme in the late 20th century. Each of these shifts signalled different partners for the WEA, for example the partnership with Oxford University to deliver the tutorial classes was superseded in the 20's when the WEA paired with the new and powerful trade union movement to deliver courses that were more political in nature. When this educational focus went into decline, the Association turned its attention to a more generic form of community education, attracting a greater diversity of partners and students that enabled the Association, once again, to redefine and expand its understanding of who was working class.

As WEA provision developed beyond the initial joint tutorial classes, more working class students were engaged, making the 1920's and 1970's a kind of golden age for the WEA. However, both of the new work-strands, although successful, brought about a number of contradictions: the introduction of political trade union education had little to do with Mansbridge's Christian reformist vision of the WEA which according to Fieldhouse (1996, p.41), sought, "To integrate the working class within middle class socio-economic structures and modify working class consciousness and political opinions" but in fact, much more to do with political consciousness raising in order to win a socialist democracy. Oxford don, R.H. Tawney would have undoubtedly used the tutorial classes as a vehicle for socialist consciousness raising and yet, the WEA's founder, Albert Mansbridge would have been quite hostile to such ideas, even though he was a firm believer in the principles of equity and democracy, as indeed the contemporary leaders of trade union education would have been!

In identifying the contradictions that criss-cross through WEA provision and its agents over time, it becomes evident that contradictions are essentially fuelled by one governing factor: whether English adult education is reformist or radical in nature. According to

Fieldhouse (1996, p.44ff), these contradictions in British adult education are the legacy of Edwardian England: a time of momentous socio-economic and political upheaval and the site that gave rise to many competing ideas and practices that forged adult education generally, and the WEA in particular.

The contradictions the Community Programme brought to the WEA were quite different again. Critics claimed that its practices contributed little to the movement and that its reliance on external funds introduced new financial vulnerabilities into the Association. The Community Programme is a particularly interesting development in WEA provision - and one that I believe marks a watershed in WEA history - not just because it feminised the WEA by introducing paid, professional, female Tutor Organisers for the first time in its history, but because in interpreting the role for themselves they fundamentally changed the practices and expectations of that quintessentially WEA function. After the introduction of the Community Programme, the once subject specialist Tutor Organisers were expected to be good all-rounders, capable of building external partnerships and sourcing alternative funding to support the work (pre-empting the developments in adult community learning that were to come by 25 years). For all these reasons, the programme divided the Association, despite initiating a true grass roots renaissance in the WEA, successfully attracting greater numbers of working class women in the late 80's and 90's - and to a lesser extent people from minority backgrounds.

In addition to these contradictions, an altogether different set of tensions emerged arising from the dynamic between structure and agency: whilst the Community Programme is a perfect illustration of how social movements - such as feminism - can inspire individual agency, and how individual agency can then go on to transform organisations, by the same token, it also demonstrates how the very structure which sustains agency can be undermined by an agent's activity. Thus, fuelling the critics' claim that the introduction of the Community Programme has in fact weakened the WEA movement. How justifiable this claim is remains to be seen, but what is clear is that personal, ideological commitments play a vital role in informing individual agency, and the influence individual agency can

assume (if nurtured within an appropriate environment), can have a profound effect on an organisation's creation, development and future direction.

Referring to figure 2, such commitments are easily located and traceable to the influential figures and partnerships that essentially 'pushed and pulled' at the WEA, providing a crucial constitutive factor to its complex organisational identity that remains as true today as in 1903. The 'pull' of divergent forms of individual agency within the WEA, as well as the 'push' of external forces on the Association - at the same time and over time - can make the WEA look, at best, contradictory and at worst, chaotic. This state of affairs, I believe, rests primarily on three factors: the WEA's ambiguous and ambivalent definition of adult education; the Association's autonomous federal structure of Branches and Districts pre 2004; and the fundamentally instrumental ideological commitments of the state to which the WEA has been bound through funding. To better facilitate this complex, critical history of the WEA, I will now address the two major tensions in turn by exploring them against the creation and evolution of the three programme areas as outlined in figure 2.

### **Can the WEA genuinely claim to be a provider of working class education?**

The tutorial class or the Liberal Programme as it became known (the forerunner of today's General Programme), was an unaccredited, three year period of study with a rigorous academic syllabus of social or modern history, economics and political science, and less often, sociology and literature (Roberts, 2003, p.42). Established in 1908 by a new joint committee between Oxford University and the WEA, this much expanded course replaced the early university extension lectures and tutorial classes made popular by leading academic and historian, R.H.Tawney. Through his legendary and extraordinary efforts during the period 1904 – 1907, his name was virtually synonymous with the WEA and greatly influenced what passed for 'really useful knowledge'. The tutorial class became the 'gold standard' of WEA education (Doyle, 2003, p.45). Whilst an academic curriculum of the liberal arts might have appealed to Mansbridge's Christian idealist sensibilities, the deeper ideological motivations behind Tawney's approach would not have, giving rise to a

contradiction early on in WEA education and prompting a persistent tension in the purpose of WEA adult education thereafter.

Tawney, also a Christian - but a committed socialist - believed that labour based movements, "Offered the best hope of restoring lost liberties and dignity to the working class" (Roberts, 2003, p.68), and that a critical education based on an analysis of social, economic and political inequalities was essential to move those most disadvantaged to act for a more 'tolerable society' (Tawney, 1931, p.197). Mansbridge's, "Uniquely English form of adult education" (Alfred, 1987, quoted in Jarvis, 1987, p.17) on the other hand had altogether different aims: using labour based movements such as co-operatives and the early trade unions as a means to access the working classes, where education would have a 'civilising influence' on them (Kelly, 1983, quoted in Alfred, 1987, p.19). Unlike Tawney, Mansbridge's reformist vision of adult education did not desire to raise class consciousness or change the class system, but sought to foster harmonious relations between the classes, stimulating friendship, humanity and wisdom through engaging models of higher learning (ibid, p.24ff).

Superficially, one might say that Mansbridge represented reformism in education and Tawney radicalism. However, critical analysis of the contemporary forces that shaped their lives and passions reveal this to be too simplistic, instead revealing a confusing dynamic of converging commitments but thoroughly divergent actions. The commitment of faith is a useful illustration: whilst Tawney and Mansbridge were both Christians - and perhaps had similar values about equality and humanity - their interpretation of how they realised these ideals professionally, manifested thoroughly different concepts of educational purpose. Mansbridge's interpretation of adult education was to ameliorate the effects of inequality, whereas Tawney's educational purpose was to eradicate it altogether, revealing yet another contradiction between the two men: the contradiction of class.

As a carpenter's son growing up in the, "Sink hole of Surrey" (Roberts, 2003, p.27) Mansbridge's experiences, theoretically, might have positioned him towards more radical political commitments. However, as so often happens with the kaleidoscopic nature of class contradiction, it was Tawney - a leading intellectual figure from the establishment - who became known for his radicalism. Ordinarily, one might suppose the positions adopted by Mansbridge and Tawney to be irreconcilable, but their shared values about what adult education should *be* rather than what it should do, and the importance each of these men set aside for the special relationship between tutor and student, gave rise to perhaps one of the greatest contradictions of all in 20th century working class education: the WEA tutorial class.

Yet for all its acclaimed success the WEA tutorial class only ever attracted a small fraction of the working class, as WEA recruitment methods tended to focus primarily on men who were unionised; part of a guild; or belonged to one of the many Friendly Societies and Co-operative movements popular at the time. This changed in 1905 when the "Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men" decided to admit female tutorial students and become the Workers' Educational Association (Doyle, 2003, p.6), but this did little overall to boost the numbers of working class students, or loosen the stranglehold that men had taken in the tutorial class (Munby, 2003a, pp.217-219).

The relatively small numbers of working class tutorial students has often been blamed on the academic nature of the WEA tutorial class, and that it was burdensome for novice working class students who were already stretched by their limited resources. Evidence supporting this appears in 1909 when, just one year after the tutorial classes were up and running, WEA class secretary Edward Stuart Cartwright writes of the problems he often encountered owing to, "The unstable conditions of life of the ordinary industrial student, with sometimes long and sometimes irregular hours of work, and the uncertainty of employment" (Roberts, 2003, p.47). However, there is also evidence to suggest that after the WEA's initial rapid growth of 1904 – 1907 and a brief flurry of interest in the 'social problem' following the First World War (Dover–Wilson, 1928, p.58), working class students

began to lose interest in the 'abstract' tutorial class on the grounds of *relevance* (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.278ff).

The curriculum, which became a thorny issue for the WEA thereafter, generated much internal debate as to what kinds of subjects could best attract the working class: a liberal academic education or a more overtly practical one? According to Fieldhouse (1996, pp.44-45), this detracted from the real underlying issue in English adult education which was the false dichotomy, whereby, as a result of separate funding streams for academic and vocational pursuits, knowledge was forever to be pitted against skills. I shall return to this later when I look into how Government funding has affected the education of the working class, yet it should be noted at this juncture that the wider literature also reinforces this false dichotomy, highlighting – somewhat uncritically - the failures of experiments into academic education for the working classes, leading the reader to either assume that technical education was preferred by the working man or that they could not cope *intellectually* with the demands of a Liberal or Classical education. Examples demonstrating this 'preference' range from Reverend Bayley's People's College in Sheffield (1842) to the great many Working Men's Colleges of the 1850's which, within a few years, replaced the original curriculum of the Liberal Arts with subjects of more occupational relevance (ibid, 1996, p.30).

Using a critical realist lens - and informed by Skeggs' definition of class - another interpretation presents itself, revealing this apparent curriculum preference of the working classes to be more of a 'Hobson's Choice'. The working poor, with their extremely limited access to power and meagre resources, would have understood the offer of vocational learning as a rare opportunity to secure better material circumstances in a time where the disenfranchised working classes had little or no education, healthcare and social security (Peacock, 1982, p.108ff). Having said that, there is evidence to show that the working classes *did* engage in academic learning, and what is more, had a long tradition of doing so, inviting a fresh appraisal of the nature of working class education and to what end people participated in it.

The critical perspective taken in this study illuminates another aspect of working class educational history that shows their persistent efforts not to have been completely blighted by a record of failure, which according to more critical sources, resulted from financial and organisational difficulties (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.14); assimilation by middle class societies and religious groups (Graham, 1983, p.45; Radcliffe, 1986, pp.53-4; or state opposition (Kelly, 1992, p.136). This latter point is interesting, revealing a lengthy struggle between the working classes, the state, and the establishment to define and control adult education, laying bare their respective ideological motivations in what was ultimately a fight for the control of ideas and power (Simon, 1992, pp.15-64).

This critical perspective further reveals that working class educational values were peculiar to them *as a class*, and that they had different expectations of what education should be, which was, "Either social and entertaining or politically useful" (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.39). This put working class definitions of education at odds with other emerging forms of private, voluntary and state supported provision – including the Mechanics Institutes, which were used to channel working class activities into self-improvement rather than challenging the political status quo (Keane, 1975, pp.256-7). Moreover, because the nature of indigenous working class education was informal, ephemeral, often non-institutional, life-long and, "Embraced communal reading and discussion groups in pubs, clubs, coffee houses, workshops and private homes" (Johnson, 1983, quoted in Fieldhouse, 1996, p.15), it is highly likely that such activities have been overlooked or dismissed *as education*.

Yet in accepting a broader definition of what constitutes education, by going beyond the official history of working people's participation in elementary or reformist education provided by philanthropists, religious societies, the church or the state (Kelly, 1970; Fieldhouse, 1996), an alternative history of working class participation in education emerges (Simon, 1992, p.303). What surfaces from this insufficiently theorised history is that the working classes not only had an enduring appetite for learning, but were motivated, resourceful and tenacious in their learning, and despite the punitive attempts

by the state to outlaw their activities (Kelly, 1992, p.136) showed great resolve in continuing to develop their own tradition, a tradition which crucially saw education as politics, and politics as education.

Central to this tradition is the long history of the working class autodidact - a testimony of the academic ability of working class individuals – who, like many working men of the time belonged to the very earliest working class Self-help and Mutual Improvement Societies and, "Were widely read not only in contemporary radical literature, but also in the political and social writings of the eighteenth century enlightenment" (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.13).

Inspired by the French Revolution, that same tradition spawned the influential working class radical movements of the Chartists and Syndicalists (besides many others) and their ideas did not die off after the demise of these movements in the 19th century, but carried over into the new independent working class educational organisations of the 20th century (ibid, p. 4). The Plebs League, the National Council of Labour Colleges and Ruskin College, directly descended from this indigenous working class radical tradition and, in keeping with the expectations of that tradition, delivered a class-conscious curriculum that was overtly Marxist. Making use of methods proven by previous generations of the tradition who, led by the more advanced students rather than professional tutors, educated ordinary people through open, communal, informal lectures, lively debates and study circles (Kelly, 1970; Simon, 1992, p.72; Fieldhouse, 1996, pp.15 and 264) .

The early tutorial classes of the University Extension Movement, first trialled by Cambridge University<sup>18</sup> in 1867, then Oxford in 1878, before being further developed by the WEA joint committee in 1908, bore striking similarities both in substance and style to the lectures given by the indigenous working class educational network of organisations *but were not part of that radical tradition*. As such, these developments by the ancient English universities and the WEA may be considered as attempts by the middle classes to colonise the working classes, trying to integrate them, "Within middle class socio-

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<sup>18</sup> In 1867 James Stewart ran a programme of lectures for ladies' associations in cities in the north of England.

economic structures and modify working class consciousness and political opinions" (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.41).

Moreover, the decision to engage working class students in extension classes was not driven from purely academic or philanthropic motivations on the part of these ancient universities. It was forced out of self-interest and survival, as Lloyd George's democratic reforms of 1911 - which extended the political franchise to a section of the working class - threatened their historical, and hitherto unquestioned, relationship with wealth and power (Simon, 1974, p.313; Fieldhouse, 1996, p.36ff). According to Fieldhouse (1987, pp.30-47) and Simon (1992, pp.52-57), the establishment's response to this changing political climate was clear: the specialist extension classes were an ideal way to influence the future leaders of the new Labour Party, as well as curb the immediate and growing popularity of the distinctly left-wing independent working class educational movement (IWCE).

Just eight years after launching its tutorial class, the WEA were already devising an alternative programme, to meet the growing demand for shorter work oriented courses, which would rival those of its competitors (Roberts, 2003, p.138). However, unlike the WEA, these competitors drew their students entirely from the trade union membership which financed them; and offered a distinctly class conscious form of adult education (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.265). A prime example of this self-supporting endeavour was the Central Labour College<sup>19</sup> (CLC), which could claim an enviable majority of working class students from either the National Union of Railwaymen or the South Wales Miners' Federation (Simon, 1992, pp.19ff, p.90). The success of the IWCE movement grew within just a few years, enabling them to outstrip the WEA in this area of provision, and exercise, "A real influence in the labour movement nationally" which lasted from 1916 up until 1940 (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.266, p.276).

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<sup>19</sup> The Central Labour College was established in 1909 following a student strike at Ruskin College.

The Association's response was to appoint a union man: Jimmy Mactavish as WEA General Secretary in 1915, and to build on earlier discussions it had had with the unions and follow up on a pamphlet Mactavish had written called: *What Labour Wants from Education?* This pamphlet formed the basis of a new joint programme between the unions and the WEA, and represented a major departure in WEA education that was meant to rival the popular Marxist education offered by Ruskin College; the CLC; The Plebs League and the National Council of Labour Colleges, marking the second phase of WEA programme development that would eventually evolve into the Workplace Programme.

The development of the WEA's trade union education strikes two notable similarities with the development of its tutorial classes (General Programme), revealing the Association's strategic approach to, a) be reliant upon influential people and partnerships, and b) borrow heavily from the working class radical education tradition. As I have argued, the WEA tutorial class owes much to the early university extension lectures trialled by Cambridge and Oxford, and before that, the practices of the working class educational networks and organisations of the 18th and 19th centuries. The major breakthrough for the WEA was in its ability to appeal to, and co-opt, influential establishment figures such as Gore, Temple, Tawney, Morant and Beveridge, to adapt and champion this form of provision. Similarly, trade union education depended upon influential trade unionists such as Mactavish, Pugh and Cole to join forces with the WEA and set up the Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC) in 1919, to together develop short courses for the workplace, using educational models that IWCE had already shown to be successful.

WEA trade union education amounted to a fairly open rejection of Mansbridge's vision of education, which stressed learning 'for its own sake' (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.168), and it introduced a competing notion of socially purposeful adult education based on knowledge for action; moving the Association a little closer to the working class radical tradition of 'really useful knowledge'. However, it must be said that the sort of radicalism union involvement brought to the WEA reflected the general radicalism that was on the rise in contemporary society, where organised movements were becoming increasingly militant

and, as in the case of the Suffragettes, violent (Peacock, 1982, p.179ff). It is therefore unsurprising that in a period where socialism was, "Replacing or strongly influencing Christianity" as the driving force behind working class education (Harrison, 1961, p.229; Alfred, 1987, p.28; Fieldhouse, 1996, p.176), the lines between some WEA Branches and the radical, Marxist independent organisations became blurred.

The power of the early 20th century trade union movement, in addition to the political promise of the newly formed Labour Party, could not be ignored, and the WEA's creative response to this highly charged and politicised climate was, rather expediently, to welcome a new set of agents into the fold that could offer the Association a way forward. The unique personal perspectives and political commitments of those agents introduced new ideas – and more importantly new courses to the WEA - helping it to expand its operations and diversify its student body, shifting the WEA's focus over time from liberal education with the universities, to trade union education in the workplace.

As university involvement and the tutorial class had become synonymous with the WEA, this new direction in trade union education could have easily triggered a crisis of identity, yet interestingly, no such thing occurred. The WEA's structure showed itself to be extraordinarily organic in this respect; simultaneously housing very different, sometimes competing, and even conflicting strands of practice. This has led to the WEA being labelled a 'broad church' - a term that communicates well the notion of the WEA as an inclusive organisation – which, through its loose structure, attracted and nurtured a great diversity of agents: furnishing them with a genuine level of autonomy to interpret the mission at either a local, or national level.

However, it has been said that this same structure also gave rise to great unevenness in the WEA, allowing curious situations to occur where some local WEA Branches, adopting 'radical' interpretations of the mission, became indistinguishable from other organisations and rivals, whilst other Branches - that remained steadfast to the original formula of

delivering tutorial classes (later the General Programme), became increasingly estranged from the working class, which G.D. H Cole raised as a cause for concern as early as 1924. All this considered, why didn't the WEA rectify the short-comings of its flagging tutorial class, instead of developing a different strand of provision that put the WEA in direct competition with IWCE? Perhaps because the WEA is reticent to critically evaluate its provision: a notion I shall return to shortly when I look at the demise of WETUC programme in the 30's. However, the new focus on trade union education *did* bring something additional to the WEA because, apart from expanding its definition of 'really useful knowledge' to incorporate a more radical concept of education in some quarters, it also broadened its understanding of the 'working class', to include thousands of unionised working men *and women*, exposing by default, the WEA's original operating definition of 'working class' as somewhat select and partial.

Greater affiliation with the unions was certainly a logical way for the WEA to access more working class people at this time, and the Association's efforts paid off: the WEA successfully affiliated 27 unions by 1939, including two of the largest unions: the Transport and General Workers Union and the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (Doyle, 2003, p.59). However, using the number of affiliates as a marker of the WEA's success in this area of provision is problematic, in that, the rise of trade union education from 1919-1939 offered by WETUC, directly led to the demise of IWCE's own form of highly politicised class conscious education it delivered to the trade unions. This resulted in the eventual disappearance of the radical educational tradition altogether, as union education became increasingly reformist and moderate. As Fieldhouse (1987) put it; WEA involvement in trade union education over the course of the 20th century undoubtedly, "Helped to channel and reduce pressures and conflict, neutralise class antagonism and integrate the working class into British society" (Fieldhouse, 1987, quoted in Jennings, 2003, p.108).

This was brought about by the WEA quite brazenly exploiting the internal ideological divisions within IWCE: 'borrowing' their provision (the correspondence courses and the Sixpenny Library were originally developed by Ruskin College and the CLC) and

undermining IWCE's relationships with the trade unions upon which they were dependent. Preferred by the state, the WEA was considered a, "Politically and socially a 'safe' movement" (Jennings, 1973, p.25; 1975, p.58) that, unlike IWCE, had managed to secure financial state support; enabling it to rapidly expand and promote its courses - including trade union courses delivered through WETUC. Thus, with its steady stream of state funding, the WEA was arguably in a stronger position than IWCE - a position fortified by Responsible Body status in 1924; cementing the WEA's place as a trusted provider of adult education - until it was rescinded by the state in 1989.

Yet despite the WEA's financial advantage, the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) continued to grow, and by 1935 it outstripped WETUC provision, making the enviable claim that its student body that was, "Over 80 per cent working class"<sup>20</sup> (Simon, 1992, p.194). This achievement is all the more remarkable considering the barriers the NCLC had to face: increasing ideological fragmentation within IWCE; the punitive Government anti-trade union legislation of 1922; and the loss of two of its biggest supporting unions in 1929 which, undoubtedly, would have been a huge financial blow to the organisation. That said, in some respects the WEA was more vulnerable than the IWCE movement, as the WEA's close relationship with the state made the Association accountable for the grants they received; and therefore subject to compulsory HMI inspections. These measures, well used today in the public education sector by the state, facilitated greater scrutiny and control of the WEA (Fieldhouse, 1996, pp.176-177). IWCE believed this tainted the WEA's ideological purity and educational approach (Doyle, 2003, p.58), as its essentially reformist mission was used to curb the political power of the working class.

One might take the view however that, in the face of such punitive state restrictions on trade union activity during this era (1919-1939), the WEA had at least secured trade union education for the future - if only in moderate form - for there is little doubt that had the WEA showed signs of solidarity with IWCE, they would have lost the favour of the state

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<sup>20</sup> In the 1930's 1/3rd of the WEA's student body was drawn from the manual classes; in 1946 it fell to 1/4 and by 1956 it was around 1/10<sup>th</sup> (Doyle, 2003, p.22ff).

and its grant aid would have ceased (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.176). Further, the WEA's Responsible Body status might well have been retracted, and the WEA, cut off from the mainstream, would have been left to fend for themselves, as IWCE had to. This option would have given the WEA real independence from the state, but interestingly the WEA chose not to join, or show solidarity with IWCE, but to continue competing against them. This, predictably, led to the demise of less competitive, or more radical organisations, but also a growing pressure on the remaining players to merge -which is eventually what happened - when the TUC continued to push for the rationalisation of union education in the 60's.

British society was much changed after the Second World War (McIlroy, 1990a, cited in Simon, p.173ff) and once the Labour Party was in power, a new social contract with the unions emerged to mark a watershed in labour history, shifting both the Labour Party - and the trade union movement - from a position of political radicalism and opposition to capitalism in the early part of the 20th century, to an acceptance of it, and a concern for productivity in the latter part of that century (ibid, p.186). In this climate, new priorities with a narrower vocational focus surfaced that identified a need for 'competent representatives' (Doyle, 2003, p.62) and for practical courses (Roberts, 2003, p.164) which would address, "The day-to-day needs of the union by lay office holders" (Doyle, 2003, p.62).

An report on trade union education published in 1953, calling for a 'different approach' (Roberts, 2003, p.170), had still not been addressed by either the IWCE movement or by WETUC, but for different reasons: the IWCE movement was struggling ideologically with the whole shift to the Right, and the WEA was stuck with its academic notions of quality when, according to Caldwell, "Declining enrolments should have set off alarm bells and new ways of thinking" (Caldwell, 2003, quoted in Roberts, p.259). In 1959, as in 1925, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) called for providers offering union education to combine - and to become incorporated into the TUC - in order to definitively resolve the issue of competing and alternative forms of educational provision for working class organisations.

When WETUC finally agreed to this in 1963, it signalled the end of the last independent working class educational organisation and the WEA's greatest rival: the NCLC, but also the end of the radical working class educational tradition. Swollen by the numbers of newly incorporated WETUC tutors, a dramatically expanded TUC launched its own programme aimed exclusively at improving union representatives' performance (McIlroy, 1990c, cited in Simon, p.246). This, by default, redefined the role of WEA tutors who worked within this strand, leaving the Association struggling once again to interpret and fulfil its own organisational mission - and open to the charge that it had either lost its way, or become elitist (Fieldhouse, 1996, pp.184-185; Doyle, 2003, p.22).

The Russell Priorities of the 70's offered a brief period of respite from these functional concerns - and perhaps helped the WEA to find their way again - but it was all over too soon, as the election of the Conservative Party in 1979 signalled an altogether different phase of union development, and as it turned out, one that would see them emerge in 1997 from a long period of anti-union legislation as *learning* organisations. However, during its short lifetime the Russell Priorities (1973–1979) did afford the WEA invaluable opportunities to experiment; particularly with women's education and with Black and Asian communities (Doyle, 2003, p.53). These early experiments formed the basis of what was eventually to become perhaps the most contentious of all WEA core provision: the Community Programme.

The development of this work stream was different to other WEA programmes as it was neither 'borrowed' nor dependent upon an influential joint committee, but inspired from the WEA itself. For the first time in the Association's history, women emerged from the grass roots feminist movements of the 60's and 70's to join the WEA as paid, professional, Tutor Organisers, and informed by their political commitments (just as Tawney and Mactavish were), developed courses that would pull the Association in a particular direction.

Many of these new courses were targeted at working class women and aimed to raise their political awareness - rekindling the radical tradition of 'really useful knowledge' - but in doing

so, set female Tutor Organisers at odds with the moderate organisational temperament of the WEA, and its own reformist history. Yet again, the WEA's understanding of who it defined as working class was revealed to be partial, and masculine, an organisational trait that arguably still lingers in the Association today (Munby, 2003a). This all suggests that there may well have been a certain level of organisational discomfort with the new venture, and indeed, despite the success of the Community Programme to reunite the WEA with its emancipatory mission, it was not universally welcomed by all in the Association.

Apart from the increasing feminisation of the Association, the predominantly male District Secretaries also had to get used to managing an environment that demanded greater levels of professionalisation, in what would eventually become a marketised educational framework, based not on grants but on contracts. This shift was no doubt challenging for some District Secretaries, especially if they happened to manage one of the new set of younger female Tutor Organisers, who, in embracing such changes, all but reinvented the role to exact their radical community education purpose.

Historically, as I have said, WEA Tutor Organisers tended to be subject specialists, but the changing educational climate forced a more generalist approach; demanding a skill-set from Organisers that could fundraise for the creation, delivery and evaluation of self-contained community projects rather than just teach. Whilst the new programme successfully drew working class women into the WEA, it was nevertheless criticised by insiders who believed it dumbed down the WEA's education, but also, because it contributed little to the wider voluntary movement - and more seriously: introduced financial and organisational vulnerabilities into the organisation, by operating outside of the WEA Branch structure.

I shall deal with each of these points in turn, but it is perhaps timely to consider the lengthy period of post-war decline that the WEA found itself in before the creation of the Community Programme; and to also acknowledge that, by the 1960's, the Association's core provision - developed specifically to attract the working classes - now effectively lay

with university extra mural departments and the TUC, jeopardising the WEA's claim as a specialist adult education provider to those most disadvantaged in society. According to Thomas Kelly, former Director of Extra-Mural Studies at Liverpool University: what the WEA really needed to do if they were to reach, "An ever widening circle of working class students" was to introduce, "A much greater range and variety of elementary courses" (Doyle, 2003, pp.52-3). Which is what became of the Community Programme, after its initial focus on women's empowerment and political consciousness-raising in the 70's and 80's.

In many ways the Community Programme appears to have revived the WEA, and arguably set it on the path of actually engaging the 'working class', but in doing so, its trail blazing Tutor Organisers escalated the use of managerialist practices that anticipated the marketisation of education in the 90's: changes which some in the WEA believe adversely affected the nature of WEA education and the special relationship between WEA tutor and student. As an increasing amount of time and energy became oriented on seeking, and maintaining, a growing number of lucrative external partnerships in order to sustain the Community Programme, tasks once central to the Tutor Organiser role - such as building Branches and recruiting students - fell by the wayside. These developments split the WEA membership: with the 'modernists' championing the new programme against the 'traditionalists' who defended the old Branch programme, and who were critical of the Community Programme, believing it made no contribution to the voluntary movement, and that its external arrangements made the WEA vulnerable.

The first point is interesting because, although it is true that the Community Programme operated largely outside of the Branch structure, it did in fact inspire many women - through women's studies and writing workshops - to participate in learning, and to become active in their communities (Fryer, 1990, cited in Simon, pp.300-301). This could be interpreted as a revival of the radical working class tradition, of activism in education, and of WEA education in particular, because many of these women went on to make a direct contribution to the Association by becoming WEA lay tutors. It is questionable whether the

General Programme or WETUC made such an impact in the same way, as the former imparted a theoretical appreciation of political agency, whilst the latter concentrated on building the capacity of union functionaries. It is also the case, as I have noted elsewhere, that the voluntary movement was struggling long before the development of the Community Programme *and not because of it*, and that this was a pernicious problem for all the reasons Raymond Williams cites in his infamous Open Letter (appendix 3). The second point, which centres on the claim that the Community Programme's dependence on external partnerships increased greater vulnerabilities into the WEA, is also interesting, and forms part of a larger debate about how sponsors - including the state - can affect an organisation's autonomy, which I will now address.

### **How have Government funds affected the autonomy of the WEA?**

Up until 1989, the WEA's principal source of funding was Government grants, and since then has been through Government contracts, but this relationship has always been a contentious issue because, according to the IWCE movement, it would compromise the WEA as an independent provider of working class education, making it vulnerable to shifts in policy (Jarvis, 1987, pp.27-28; Doyle, 2003, p.58). As the forgoing argument illustrates, there is some justification for this view - as state aid - first to establish the tutorial class in 1908, and then to support a more moderate form of trade union education from 1919 -1939, not only influenced what kind of adult education was available to the working classes, but the direction of the WEA itself.

As I have argued, state support for the Association was not ideologically neutral, and the Government's preference for the WEA over the radical, independent, working class colleges was a key factor in both the rise of the WEA, and the demise of the radical working class independent tradition. As Jennings writes,

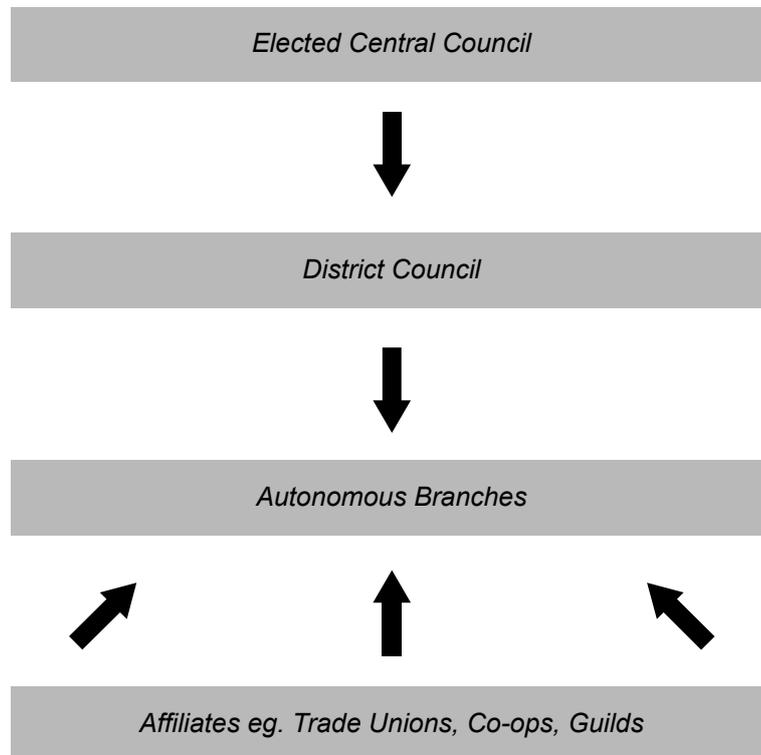
"There is no doubt that the 'establishment' preferred the WEA and Ruskin to the Labour college movement, a fact exploited quite brazenly by the WEA in the 1920's. Temple, Tawney and A.D. Lindsay all warned the Board of Education and the LEA's

that unless they supported the WEA and respected its academic freedom, workers' education would fall to the NCLC" (Jennings, 2003, quoted in Roberts, p.105).

This reveals much about the politics of Tawney, uncovering deep reformist tendencies at work which allow Tawney - a self-proclaimed socialist - to favour the WEA over the popular and overtly Marxist NCLC. It also exposes the WEA to be *outside* of the working class radical tradition in education, and content to take expedient measures to secure its place as the major voluntary provider of adult education. Apart from making the WEA's ideological position explicit, this also uncovers a lesser known aspect of the Association's identity: that of a cut throat competitor, and one that is willing to trade off its own autonomy for the sake of financial security. Mirroring such expediency, the Government welcomed the WEA and its special form of education, "As a bulwark against revolutionism, a moderating influence and a form of social control" (Fieldhouse, 1996, quoted in Roberts, 2003, p.108). Thus, the first Government grant awarded to the WEA in 1907 to increase the number of tutorial classes, rapidly expanded the number of its Branches, enabling the Association to compete against its popular independent rivals, and in doing so, weakened the working class radical educational movement *and at the same time*, thwarted the spread of socialist ideas (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.4).

Whilst the WEA no doubt enjoyed this period of growth, the rapid rise in the number of Branches presented the Association with a specific organisational challenge, as it had yet to formalise its constitutional arrangements (Doyle, 2003, pp.12-13). Government financial aid - in the form of grants - no doubt motivated the WEA to address this, and in the same year the Association was funded to specifically develop non-vocational education, they also adopted a constitution that set down its organisational character: defining the WEA as a federation of autonomous Branches that were loosely governed by District Councils (Figure 2.1). Integral to this structure, and of course the WEA mission, was the participation of partner organisations, or affiliates, such as guilds and trade unions, which would give the WEA access to working class students, as well as assist the WEA with the development of their educational programmes, as I have argued.

**Figure 2.1: Original Structure of the WEA**



Settling its organisational arrangements relatively quickly, arguably left little opportunity for the WEA membership to tackle more fundamental aspects of its operations, which unresolved, regularly resurfaced to be hotly debated, such as the purpose of WEA education; the relevance of its curriculum; the composition of its student body; and how best to keep the voluntary movement alive. Busy with expansion in the early years, one might say that the WEA overlooked these issues (and its interpretation of the 'working class') and as a result evolved into a unique, but ambiguous organisation where it was possible, as I have illustrated in this chapter, for a broad spectrum of influential figures and dominant agendas to influence the Association in particular ways.

This tendency for the WEA to change direction has elicited much criticism of the Association, claiming it to be lacking in focus, 'woolly' and 'weak'. Yet many supporters of

the WEA might argue that, *because* of its organisational flexibility, the Association is able to adapt and, "To re-invent itself without losing its soul" (Doyle, 2003, p.3). Indeed, as Doyle (2003, p.17) and Fieldhouse (1996, p.170) point out the, "Assumption of autonomy built into the arrangements of 1907" may be a stroke of genius on Mansbridge's part, because, in structuring the WEA as a genuinely democratic movement, the Association is able to take advantage of differing agendas, actively involve a wide variety of agents at all levels of the Association, nurture and develop agents in their interpretation of the mission, and ensure that such interpretations were the result of a negotiated process with its student body. With participatory democracy at the very heart of the original WEA structure, perhaps the issues which keep resurfacing, do so, because they are not meant to be resolved, but continuously debated by a changing membership that is individually and collectively, constantly evolving.

This structure, and the pernicious issues that regularly inhabited its spaces, was robust enough to last until 1990, when an Employment Appeal Tribunal judged the WEA to be a single employer, and thus, a single organisation rather than a federation. However until that time came, the WEA made the most of the opportunities its unique federal structure afforded it, and, through its autonomous Branches and Districts, made independent claims on state finances that helped to launch the WEA, and later expand it. State funds have always been vitally important to the WEA's development, and indeed without them the WEA might have never got off the ground, but there were alternatives - and good reasons not to accept state aid - as the IWCE movement warned. For whilst the WEA has clearly benefited from their special relationship with the state, it has undeniably affected the Association's level of autonomy, making them overly sensitive to shifts in Government policy and even compromising their decision making processes (Doyle, 2003, p.30). As a result, the WEA has at times seemed complacent in developing its own programmes, reticent in tackling its own failing provision, and even reactionary by aligning itself to Government agendas that have reinforced and reproduced social inequalities, rather than reduced them.

For example, the Government grant awarded to the WEA in 1919 expanded the movement as intended, but it also extended its one year tutorial class to form a three year General Programme, despite the fact that working class students were losing interest in this programme, and demanding more accessible short courses! (Doyle, 2003, p.47). The long term impact of this arguably prolonged the life of a programme, that, early on in the WEA story, was failing to meet its own emancipatory objectives (Fieldhouse, 1996, pp.188-189) and which, over time, became increasingly elitist, attracting much criticism of the WEA (Ibid, pp.184-185; Doyle, 2003, p.22).

Yet rather than take remedial action, the WEA compensated for the failings of its General Programme by creating WETUC to develop trade union education instead. This exposed the WEA to a new form of scrutiny and state control, that ultimately depoliticised the Association, its students, and the wider working class radical tradition. For, in accordance with the anti-trade union legislation of the time, the WEA was now subject to regular LEA inspections that ensured the WEA would be confined, "Within the broad centre of the British political spectrum, avoiding political extremes" (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.178); thereby equipping, "Thousands of workers with the critical objectivity of the student rather than with the impassioned prejudice of the agitator" (Ashby Committee, 1954, quoted in Fieldhouse, 1996, p.179). Curbing radicalism in this way, demonstrated a particularly useful dimension of the inspection process, that could successfully realign the priorities of independent providers to those of the state – a function which has since been developed and extended to affect transformations across whole sectors, as I have argued in the previous chapter.

However, Fieldhouse (1996) believes the impact of the very first WEA grant in 1907 was much more fundamental than this, because in funding the WEA to specifically provide *non-vocational education*, the Government created an additional, separate funding pathway to the one that had existed since the 1880's, and which supported Scientific Societies and Royal Institutes to deliver *technical education*. This introduced a false dichotomy into the English adult education system that has left a damaging legacy (Fieldhouse, 1996, pp.44-45), the effects of which have destabilised holistic practices of adult education: leading to

professional identities and practices that do not reflect the reality of adult education praxis, which commonly involve a necessary interchange between both knowledge *and* skills. Moreover, it has resulted in a two-tiered service that reinforces class based inequalities: disproportionately channelling working class students into lower status vocational education and training, rather than the more esteemed knowledge-based opportunities which, "The middle classes consistently gobble up" (ibid, p.400). This false dichotomy is arguably responsible for introducing and embedding inherent insecurities within the English system, putting the financial health of adult education at risk, by making it overly sensitive to shifts in Government policy. The impact of this amongst non-vocational adult education providers has led to an existential crisis in recent years, as they have struggled to find funding in an increasingly functionalist environment.

As educational funding became firmly oriented towards improving economic competitiveness from the 80's onwards, the ambivalence of Government grant aid was exposed, triggering new financial instabilities for the WEA, on top of fears that this familiar, but increasingly less rewarding system would be replaced with market style contracts. For external critics, this illustrated a level of dependence on the state which showed the WEA to be little more than an extension of its Department for Education, but according to critics inside the WEA - most notably the 'traditionalists' – the fault lay closer to home, and was largely the result of a growing number of complex external partnership funding arrangements that were being introduced to the WEA through its own Community Programme.

As the WEA has historically been structured on partnerships, this might seem a questionable point to raise, but it is true to say that the nature of the WEA's partnerships changed with the advent of the Community Programme - becoming more diverse and greater in number - presenting certain managerial challenges for the Association. Perhaps the reason for its organisational discomfort lay in the fact that many of these newer partnerships were *locally* inspired, and led by Tutor Organisers rather than by influential individuals who, in the past, had negotiated the WEA's core programmes at a national level.

Yet, for all the criticism that has been levelled at the Community Programme, arguably the only genuinely WEA core programme of the three, it not only reunited the Association with their true purpose when all other WEA provision was failing to do so, but offered an alternative model of sustainability that would, in the highly marketised educational climate of the 90's and Noughties, prove invaluable to the WEA. Somewhat ahead of their time, the Tutor Organisers behind the Community Programme had heeded the strong hints contained within the Russell Report which suggested that, "The age of a 'contract' with the State based on 'general' grant support was over" (Doyle, 2003, p.35), and they experimented instead with the opportunities the Russell Priorities afforded them: developing joint projects with an extensive network of partners that resulted in successful high profile initiatives such as the 'Return to Learn' programme, or the women's writing workshops of the 90's.

However, instead of embracing the potential of the Community Programme and what it might be able to offer the Association - within a sector that was being rapidly marketised - the WEA exercised its organisational reticence again and returned to 'business as usual'. But, as the WEA senior management team were to find out in the 90's; trying to operate a movement to a state endorsed professional service demanded an altogether different response, and one that could translate the FHE Act (1992), (which redefined students as 'customers' and learning as 'outputs'), into something that was still recognisable as 'really useful knowledge'. The WEA failed to do this, and under the banner of ensuring quality standards in education, was forced by the inspectorate's recommendations to completely restructure in 2004.

What is clear from this, and indeed from the 'failed' inspection of 2004 which preceded the regionalisation of the WEA, is that there was a fundamental mismatch between the WEA's 19th century structure (intended to foster collective civic action), and the state's demand for a more formalised service offering individual credit bearing courses and qualifications. Somewhat prophetically, Fieldhouse predicted over twenty years ago, that the increasing centralisation of the WEA would also increase its subservience to the state, and thereby compromise the autonomy of its voluntary membership (1996, p.394). Now more

centralised than Fieldhouse could have then imagined, and regionalised for the first time in its history, it will be interesting to learn what impact this alternative structure has had on the WEA and its historic mission, and more specifically, how it has affected individual and collective agency – formerly the lifeblood of the WEA movement. It will certainly be challenging for the WEA to operate within a National Qualifications Framework that advances positivist notions of learning, and to find or recreate the spaces where 'really useful knowledge' can exist, but that is surely what they must do in order to continue on their 'special adventure', otherwise it begs the question: What is the purpose of WEA education in the 21st century?

## Summary

In this chapter I take a critical approach to WEA history and the development of its core educational programmes, to discover two hotly debated and persistent tensions that have both constituted, and compromised, the WEA's identity as an independent organisation, and provider of working class education. I investigate these two themes in turn, and how they relate, but depart from traditional commentaries. Instead, I explore the interplay between the complex environments from which these tensions emerged; revealing them to be carriers of a fundamental contradiction in state funded adult education, which the WEA cannot resolve. How these contradictions have played out over time, and how the WEA has handled them, reveals much about the WEA's identity: showing it to be in flux rather than fixed by the ideals of its historic mission, with the dominant interests and agendas of the day leaving their mark on WEA provision.

By setting these developments in their historical context, I also discover lesser known characteristics of the WEA identity that show it to be a cut-throat competitor that is prepared to take expedient measures against its rivals, in order to secure its position as the largest voluntary provider of adult education in the UK. This invites a fresh appraisal of the WEA as 'a noble survivor' of working class education outside of the mainstream, or indeed as 'a victim' under threat from other organisations, or the state. What also emerges from this very complex and contradictory critical history of the WEA is the importance of the structure-agency relationship, and it becomes evident that, through its semi-autonomous federation of Branches and Districts, the WEA once nurtured a wide diversity of agents who were used to take advantage of opportunities thrown up by a constantly changing socio-political landscape.

## Chapter Four: Methodology and Methods

In this chapter, I present the analytical framework chosen for this study and highlight the suitedness of Archer's Morphogenetic Cycle to deal with the research cohort's highly reflexive data, as well as illustrate the complex dynamic that exists between the formation of agency and organisational structures. Without reducing or conflating the messiness of real life, Archer's realist concept of a stratified social world of culture, structures, and people, perfectly communicates how individuals have the potential to be transformed into social actors, who, under the right conditions, might find or create opportunities to not only develop their own agency further but to develop their organisations and communities also, bringing about change or, "A structural elaboration" (Archer: 1995: Pp75-76). Essential to this sophisticated theory of individual, organisational or societal transformation are Archer's concepts of reflexivity and emergence, which if fully realised, result in 'morphogenesis' and if not, give way to structural reproduction, or 'morphostasis' (Archer: 1995: pp.15-16).

As part of this chapter I also take a closer look at the research process, and the suitability of the methods I have chosen to access, handle, organise, and present the data. Here, I make explicit how I dealt with the issues of consent and confidentiality - outlining the ethical framework underpinning my approach - before going on to briefly to introduce the participants. The chapter concludes with a short discussion about the authenticity and the trustworthiness of this research, revealing a carefully audited process grounded in and led by the data.

## Methodology

The strengths of a critical realist approach come from a recognition that, "Human action and thought are infinitely complex, ambiguous and contradictory" (Foley, 1999, p.10), which in the context of this study, means that one can never assume there is, "A direct or automatic sequential relation between radical education and macro-level social change" (Allman and Wallis, 1995, p.19). Indeed, rather than a, "Sudden leap from 'enlightenment' to revolutionary change" (ibid), it is more realistic to expect a long, arduous process of individual conscientization before any involvement in the sort of collective struggles that can bring about transformations at an organisational or societal level. Thus, it would seem that the primary purpose of all radical adult education should be to raise consciousness, that is to say: "Prepare people, who will go on to prepare others, to transform their social relations at all levels" (ibid). This echoes Freirean thinking, which calls for a fundamental transformation of relations to overcome the oppressive domination/subordination learning construct, and is arguably what the WEA have always endeavoured to do with their, "Students and tutors working together through the practical democracy of a negotiated curriculum" (Doyle, 2003, p.86).

However, such practices which promote democracy in the classroom by encouraging the 'student-as-tutor' and 'tutor-as-student', operate on a radically different concept of knowledge which is based on an emancipatory ontology that contrasts sharply with the positivist and passive concepts that dominate education today, and which see knowledge as 'fixed', or a commodity. This radical alternative sees knowledge as an action oriented process of collaboration and co-production between learners and tutors, who, through dialogue, make explicit their own individual assumptions about a subject, to arrive at a deeper, critical, understanding of a world that is constantly moving and changing (Allman, 1988, p.96). These two contrasting ontological positions provide their own logic and coherence - for a distinct set of practices - that serve different and incompatible objectives,

"While in education for domestication one cannot speak of a knowable object but only of knowledge which is complete, which the educator possesses and transfers to the educatee, in education for liberation there is no complete knowledge possessed by the educator, but a knowable object which mediates educator and educatee as subjects in the knowing process. Dialogue is established as the seal of the epistemological relationship between subjects in the knowing process" (Freire, 1974, pp.20-21).

Dialogue: an active and dialectical form of group communication, is the bedrock of all action-oriented adult learning, and replaces standardised codified curricula used in positivist models of education, because it begins from the premise that individuals are already knowledgeable as a result of their life experiences. However, interpreting human knowledge gained from individual experience is extremely problematic, because it throws up a diversity of fallible perspectives that have been forged from our 'involuntaristic placement' in society (Archer, 1995, pp.201-3), i.e. from our gender, race and class positions. Whilst these factors shape our identity, and condition the socio-cultural context in which we find ourselves, Archer argues that *they do not determine us* (2000, p.269), because of the unique constitutive and transformative powers that singularly define the human condition, such as the inner conversation and reflection,

"Society enters into us, but we can reflect upon it, just as we reflect upon nature and upon practice. Without such referential reality there would be nothing substantive to reflect upon; but without our reflections we would only have a physical impact upon reality" (Archer, 2000, p.13).

This 'vexatious fact of society' (Archer, 1995, p.1), namely that we are formed by society but also have the capacity to transform it, makes social reality very different from the natural, and practical orders of human reality, bringing into sharp relief what Archer considers to be *the* sociological problem: the relationship between structure and agency (ibid). To crack the 'vexatious fact of society' - and still have a subject that is recognisably human - Archer diverges from both upward conflationary social theories, which overlay agential powers in shaping the world; and downward conflationary theories, that present the human agent as a hapless victim of circumstance (Archer, 2000, pp.4-7) to deploy

instead, the highly stratified morphogenetic approach, which focuses on the interplay between structure and agency to,

"[E]xplore the space between the different distribution of options, on the one hand, and the wants and needs of different kinds and different categories of individuals, on the other, to examine the degrees of freedom and constraint which are entailed by social structure" (Thompson, n.d. quoted in Archer, 1995, p.133).

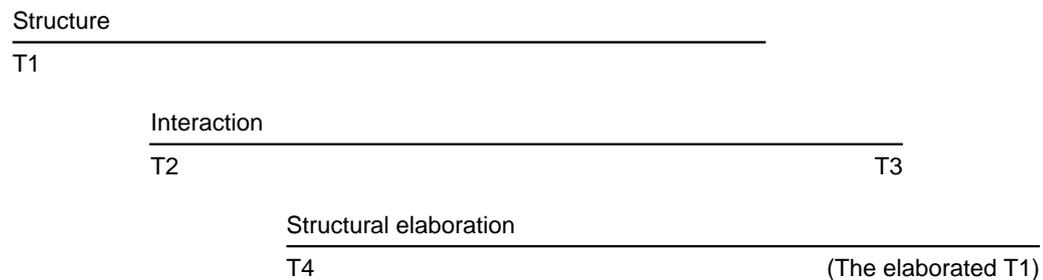
This approach forms part of a broader critical realist tradition that acknowledges the contingency of human agency upon its triune environment of the natural, practical, and social orders of human reality; and it recognises all human powers as being 'in potentia', that emerge over time and *through* human activity, as part of a complex web of dialectical relationships involving people, structure, and culture (Archer, 2000, p.269). By attributing causal powers to culture - as well as to structure and agency - and situating them within a spacio-temporal context, Archer offers a more robust, and credible, explanation for the development and manifestation of human agency which, fashioned by the 'vexatious fact of society', is often complex, inconsistent, and contradictory as,

"Generally the phenomenon of emergent spatio-temporalities situates the possibilities of over-lapping, intersecting, condensing, elongated, divergent, convergent and even contradictory rhythmic (causal processes) and, by extension, space-time measures" (Bhaskar, 1998, pp.603-604).

Despite its unpredictable nature and trajectory, human agency clearly (as history shows) has powers peculiar to itself: shaping the social world across time and space. Archer's theory of morphogenesis affirms this, but in doing so, does not shy away from the messiness of real life: acknowledging the constraints and limitations that condition human experience and agency, by grounding the development of people's powers within the realist concept of *emergence*. Using analytical dualism to delineate the cycles of conditioning, interaction, and elaboration, Archer reveals through her morphogenetic

sequences: how structure first conditions agency, and how agency, in turn, elaborates upon the structure it confronts, as illustrated in the following figure.

**Figure 3: The Morphogenetic Sequence**



(Archer, 1995, p.76)

As shown, powerful people, "Capable of planning and executing the transformation of society at all levels" (Allman, 1988, p.95) are at the very heart of Archer's theory - indeed without their activity, no structural elaboration can occur. For this reason, and because we can only exist, "Through our embodied interplay with the objective world" (Archer, 2000, p.312), critical realists maintain the primacy of practice over the discursive cultural realm, because, "To see us as purely cultural artefacts is to neglect the vital significance of our embodied practice in the world" (ibid, p.4). Despite these universal powers however, Archer concedes, not everyone will be in a position to become agents, or actors, who can develop the kind of agential powers necessary to effect societal transformation.

Essentially, this is because people's powers are *relational*, and part of a wider contingent dynamic involving other causal powers, for example, structural emergent powers (SEP's) and cultural emergent powers (CEP's); brought into being through human activity, or to use Archer's term: peoples' emergent powers (PEP's) (ibid, p.87). However, once people's powers and properties (PEP's) do emerge, our innate reflexive capabilities are triggered to further develop, enabling us to not only evaluate ourselves, others, and situations in the past and present, but to imagine future alternatives.

This affords an emancipatory view of humanity that is grounded in action, rather than one in which people are presented as, "Passive beings to whom things happen" (ibid, p.3). It also makes the art of reflection, arguably, the most important of human properties and powers, as it functions not only as a window on the world, but is part of our on-going 'interior dialogue' that determines 'our-being-in-the-world' (ibid, p.318). This is largely because, in exercising our evaluative faculty to reflect on all aspects of life, each individual forms a unique patterning of interests, or commitments, which in fact constitutes their personal identity,

"In short, we are who we are because of what we care about: in delineating our ultimate concerns and accommodating our subordinate ones, we define ourselves. We give shape to our lives, which constitutes our internal personal integrity...recognisable by others as our concrete singularity" (Archer, 2000, p.10).

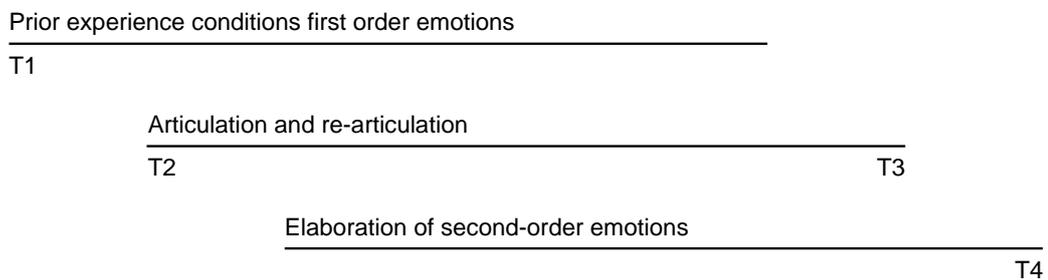
Guided by the judgement of the internal conversation which, "Has begun a dialogue about the kind of person an individual believes they want to be" (ibid, p.290), our reflective selves prioritise emotions, which initially, relate to our ineluctable involvement in the three orders of human reality. However, as the nature of human reflexivity is continuous, we then, "Reflect upon our emotionality itself, to transform it and consequently reorder [those] priorities" (ibid, p.222). This then allows us to transvalue our first order emotions into a more articulate, and reasoned, set of second order emotions (ibid, pp.222-7). Whilst these properties and powers are universal to all human beings some individuals, "Remain at the mercy of their first order<sup>21</sup> pushes and pulls" (Archer, 2003, p.22), failing to develop particular attachments because they do not care enough. Archer calls this failure to develop commitments 'drift'. I shall return to this later as it can also affect those who have developed commitments - but for now, I want to dwell on the acquisition of personal identity, which as I have outlined, is shaped by an embodied, reflective and continuous sense of self that possesses, "An account of consciousness with a real history" (Archer, 2000, p.22).

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<sup>21</sup> Natural, practical and social orders of reality.

With this understanding about ourselves, it is entirely possible for us to re-evaluate our past actions, or transvalue our pasts, which if looked at in detail and over time, can give the impression that individual identities are contradictory - or else fragile - requiring periodic reinvention. However, in line with Archer's argument as presented thus far: to review our commitments is simply human nature as reflective beings, and to change those commitments is necessary because, over time, we change too (Archer, 2000, p.302). If we did not refresh our commitments to express who we feel we are currently, we would be out of alignment, and as a result experience discomfort. When examined over a life-time, these changes to our commitments may appear very stark, as is illustrated by Archer's example of the vegetarian who, transvaluing themselves from a new vantage point, "Is disgusted at once having enjoyed a rare steak" (Archer, 2003, p.22).

**Figure 3.1: The Acquisition of Personal Identity**



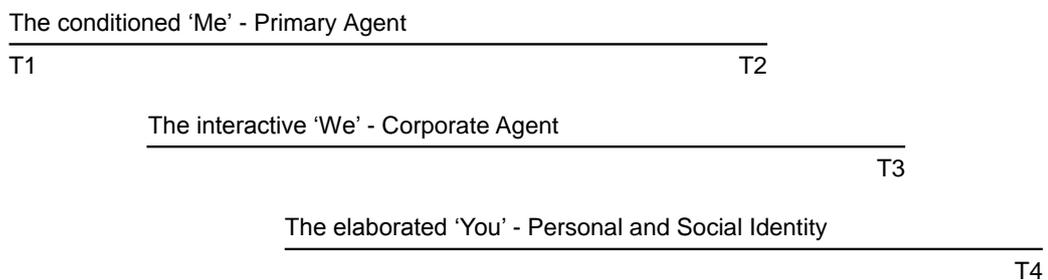
(Archer, 2000, p.227)

Commitments are not only integral to the acquisition of a personal identity, but play a vital role in the acquisition of a social identity too, and ultimately, the development of agency itself. This is because a social identity depends on the interests and values of the broader personal identity to sustain it - as well as the unique quality of personal identity - which continuously re-evaluates if commitments are worthy of maintaining. For Archer however, the key factor to acquiring a social identity depends on, "Finding a role in which they [the agents] feel they can invest themselves" (Archer, 2000, p.261). Therefore it follows that,

"What people commit themselves to in society is the key to their social identity, and one which involves considerable effort" (ibid, p.83).

"In short, our subjects can make an active and informed choice about their future occupations, but only because they have done considerable preliminary work on their environments and have internally conversed about the person they would like to become and the job which will best express this" (Archer, 2000, pp.290-91).

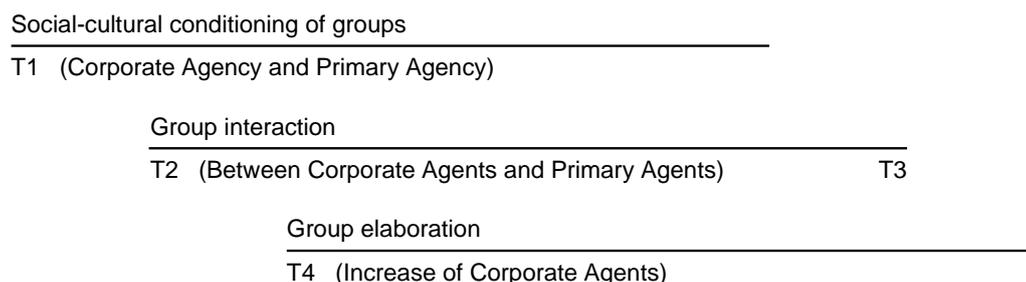
**Figure 3.2: The Acquisition of Personal and Social Identity**



(Archer, 2000, p.296)

*Investment* is the opposite of 'drift' and it is where the agent, through one of society's many roles, can further develop their personal commitments - but in a specific way - which typically involves, "Articulating shared interests, organising for collective action, generating social movements and exercising corporate influence in decision-making" (Archer, 2000 p.266). These opportunities allow the social agent to acquire corporate powers, giving their personal motivations a strategic edge that, "Cannot be rendered as 'individuals plus resources' or construed as 'the summation of an individual's self-interest' " (ibid). This is because the agent does not only perform a role in which they can invest themselves, but works strategically to, "Open doors to new parts of society's role array which were formerly inaccessible" (Archer, 2000, p.74). Archer calls this process the elaboration of roles and rules (2000, p.286), and it is represented by the T4 position in the following figure:

### Figure 3.3: The Morphogenesis of Corporate Agency



(Archer, 2000, p.268)

For the purposes of this study, there are three specific consequences of Archer's morphogenetic approach that are of particular interest and warrant further comment: firstly; whilst a social agent may invest themselves in an organisational role, there may be instances where the commitments of the agent and those of the host organisation/movement diverge considerably. Faced with pressures from agents who affect the attainment of corporate goals, organisations/movements can either pursue their self-declared goals, or continue the pursuit - but amidst a modified environment - caused by the pressures of their agents. If instances of divergence become significant, or prolonged, the agent may start to drift, unless a new *modus vivendi* is found from a reprioritisation of commitments (Archer, 2000, p.292).

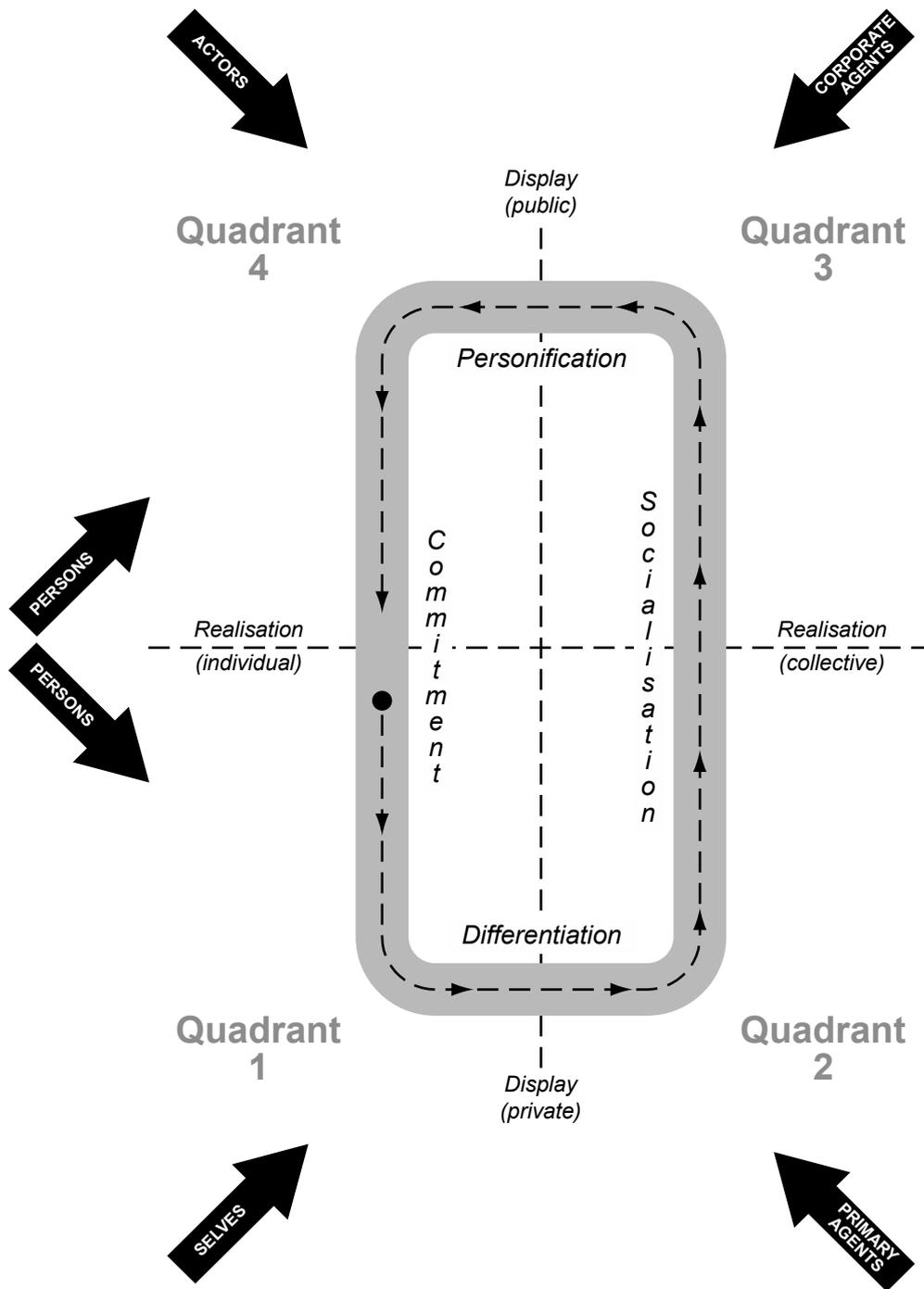
Secondly; if agents are able to influence the organisational environment and bring about an elaboration, the morphogenetic consequences of agent expansion (via group elaboration) can be problematic for both agents and the organisation itself, as an environment of divergent interests, and perhaps even conflict, is created. If the organisational structure cannot tolerate group elaboration, it may well result in the shrinkage of its primary agents - as they fragment and leave the organisation to become corporate agents with other social movements (Archer, 2000, p.266ff).

Thirdly, the elaboration or morphogenesis of structures necessarily incurs a *double morphogenesis* involving the agent, as the subject too is elaborated in the process for,

"That self-same sequence of interaction, which brings about social and cultural transformation, is simultaneously responsible for the systematic transforming of 'agency' itself " (Archer, 2000, p.258).

Using a highly stratified account of the subject for analytical and temporal purposes, Archer illustrates this morphogenesis, revealing the metamorphosis of the universal self into a social actor. This shows how, in conjunction with SEP's and CEP's, the different powers and properties of the four strata emerge at each level.

Figure 3.4: Realism's account of the development of the stratified human being



(Archer, 2000, p.254)

Undergirding this whole ontological framework is Archer's realist concept of the universal, reflexive, continuous, embodied self; and the notion of emergent properties and powers of people, structure, and culture - which not only shape our environment - but the kind of agents we might also become. Referring back to Archer's morphogenetic sequences then, it is the agent who transforms into an actor (as represented in quadrant 4) who is the highly reflexive, evaluative, and transvaluative individual who then brings about the elaborated position (shown in the diagrams as T4). This elaborated position, becomes the new 'T1' - generating a fresh cycle of morphogenesis - where agents decide anew whether to either reproduce those structures (morphostasis), or transform them (morphogenesis).

Archer's morphogenetic approach is an invaluable analytical tool for this study, as it looks at the phenomenon of how people make history; how, in challenging circumstances, people develop agency; and interestingly, under what conditions such agency flourishes to result in tangible change. From chapter three, it is clear that individuals *have* influenced the direction of the WEA, but it is equally the case that the WEA has influenced *them* in some way, and Archer's theory of how we acquire our personal and social identities sheds much light on this relationship, suggesting there is an inseparable interanimation between the two.

Through Archer's key concept of corporate agency, she reveals the vital role structures play in this relationship, and how they can be facilitative or restrictive in the development of agents and their agency. Archer's critical realist theory of agency therefore provides powerful insights for all those who identify as agents, and offers the WEA (and indeed other social movements), a novel and challenging opportunity for critical self-appraisal. If taken up, the WEA's own corporate agents could interrogate the Association's structures and systems, to decide for themselves, whether the current arrangements are fit for purpose: to successfully attract, nurture and enable agents to effectively interpret and deliver the WEA's vision.

When I began the research in 2006-7, the former Tutor Organisers were working through the radical restructure of 2004, and the majority of them were still getting used to their new positions as Regional Education Officers. Whilst their narratives deal with the effects of this reorganisation, their accounts also communicate much about their relationship with the WEA: acknowledging the movement has given them the opportunity to develop their own social identities and particular forms of agency, which, in very distinct and different ways, has been deployed to make the world a more 'tolerable' place. Before I analyse the dataset however, I want to set out the research methods and process I undertook to access, collate, handle, organise and present the data.

## Methods

As the foregoing narrative illustrates, this qualitative enquiry is underpinned by an analytical approach that considers the dialectical nature of contradictory experience (Allman, 1988, pp.88-89), as it is perfectly suited to make sense of the highly reflexive, biographical data, which emerged from a series of interviews held in 2006 – 7. Initially, I chose the conversational research interview as a method, where participants could describe, clarify, and elaborate their own perspectives on their lived experiences (Kvale, 1996, p.105), but when the first interviewee responded by telling a story of a biographical nature, I decided to adjust the original design of the research - anticipating others might also do the same. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) point out, *how* participants construct their knowledge merits just as much attention as *what* they talk about; and it was clear from the participants' 'narrative competence' (Willis, 1990, p.5), and the complexity of their accounts, that an alternative interview format would be required that could accommodate, "Contextual shifts and reflexivity" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.55). Consequently, I put my original schedule of questions to one side, in favour of a more flexible approach that allowed the participants, "To hold the floor" (Labov and Fanshel, 1977, p.105), thereby enabling them to use their, "Unique ways of defining the world [and] raise issues not contained in the schedule" (Denzin, 1970, p.125).

As a relatively inexperienced researcher I felt some apprehension about changing tack, but as the fieldwork progressed I realised, as other qualitative researchers have, that the standard interviewing process is both inadequate and inappropriate for studying how individuals perceive, organise, and give meaning to their experiences (Atkinson, 1998; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Morse, 1994; Ochberg, 1994; Reinard, 1992; Devault, 1990; Geertz, 1988; Mishler, 1986; Sarbin, 1986; Oakley, 1981). As Mishler (1986) contends, this is largely because standard interviewing techniques neglect the fact that, "*Understandings are related to their social, cultural and personal circumstances*" (my italics).

"The social milieu in which communication takes place (during interviews) modifies not only what a person dares to say but even what he thinks he chooses to say. And these variations in expression cannot be believed as mere deviations from some underlying "true" opinion, for there is no neutral, non-social, uninfluenced situation to provide that baseline" (Ithiel de Sola Pool, 1957, quoted in Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.14).

This realisation changed my approach as a research interviewer, and after the first 'dummy run' my stance shifted: from asking set questions and prompting the interviewee or 'mining' as Kvale puts it, to 'travelling' with the interviewees (1996, pp.3-4) and providing them with an, "Environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.17). Using this technique, six personal narratives emerged, rich with 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), and loaded with fascinating personal insights as to why, and how, the participants became involved with the WEA; the development and course of their agency; as well as the kind of relationship they have had with the Association over the years. Besides being perfect illustrations of Archer's theory of human agency, the level of critical reflexivity demonstrated in the life histories moved them beyond being merely interesting personal reflections, to highly sophisticated, well crafted, but complex narratives that function on a number of different levels. I will elaborate on the different functions of the narrative in the next chapter - when I introduce two contrasting stories for in-depth

analysis, but for the remainder of this chapter, I want to outline the salient features of the research process I undertook, and the ethical framework that underpinned it.

## **Interviewing the Participants**

Before devising a set of interview questions, I engaged in an intensive period of desktop research to gain a, "Deep understanding of the relevant literature" (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998, pp.154ff), which I felt was necessary as a WEA 'outsider' as,

"Background knowledge in any research circumstance, involving all types of interviewers and respondents, provides direction and precedent, connecting the researcher's interest to the respondents' experience, bridging the concrete and abstract" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.46).

From this exercise a number of themes began to emerge, around which I formulated a set of interview questions and prompts (appendix 4). However, even at that stage, I had some reservations about the process: unsure as to whether asking the 'right' questions would suffice, as this excerpt taken from my research journal illustrates:

### **July 28th 2006**

*"I have been reading about the WEA and interviewing to develop what kind of interview I want/need to undertake and ensuring I know enough about the organisation to do this justice, but an interesting conundrum has arisen, in that I am learning from the literature about dialogue and the technical aspects of setting the scene and asking questions which seem to detract from what I am really wanting to do, which is give the floor to the participants... So what I need to do...is create questions of opportunity, do a trial run to see how much I hold the floor..."*

The 'trial run' took place with the only candidate who had agreed, at that time, to participate in the study. We met at a local college where I live, and in a very small, quiet, back room I set out the recording equipment, paperwork, and a tray of tea, coffee, and biscuits. In addition to the schedule of questions I intended to ask, I had a notepad and pen to make notes during the interview, and a copy of the letter of consent that the

participant had received prior to the meeting (appendix 5). Over coffee, I briefly explained the research aims - as they were outlined in the letter - and the ethical framework I proposed to undertake in gathering and handling the data. (At this stage I had envisaged the participants taking an active role in the handling of the data, but as only one participant responded once the transcriptions were completed, and because the data generated was so voluminous, I was forced to rethink how I would in fact handle and organise the narratives by myself). Once the participant had read and signed the letter of consent, I then explained how I would conduct the interview; allowing her to have a copy of the questions for herself to read. Finally, I asked her if she had anything to ask before I switched on the recording equipment.

Once recording began, I asked my first question on the schedule and was wholly unprepared when she responded with her life history: a relevant format considering she had spent a significant part of her life working for the WEA. However, the nonlinear form of the spoken narrative did not conform to my carefully formatted questions, which unsettled me, as I feared I would be unable to cover the relevant topic areas, or make any meaningful field notes from what, at that time, seemed to me to be a fast paced and erratic process. Following this experience, I wrote in my journal:

***December 9th 2007***

*"What I have learned so far ... is that interviewing is a craft, it is first an ability to know the subject matter well by being prepared, and secondly, it is about being able to create opportunities for discourse via well-constructed and well thought out questions...but all this is in vain if the participants do not gel and discussion is punctured by awkward silences, and embarrassing repetitions that unnerve the interviewee. So much is demanded during the interview process ...The experience is overwhelming."*

Fortunately, there were no awkward silences or embarrassing repetitions, largely because the interviewee skilfully communicated a coherent and critically reflexive personal narrative - upon which I could recontextualise the data and apply it to other settings (Morse, 1994, p.27). My reflections about this first interview experience strengthened my

resolve to attempt a more open ended style of interview for the other participants, who I accessed somewhat opportunistically, as I will soon explain. For these interviews, I consciously minimised my own interventions, and interjected only to clarify a point or to foster 'narrative activity' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.76). In every other respect, the procedures mirrored those of the first interview, up until I asked the first question on the schedule, which was: why had they joined the WEA? Thereafter, the participant held the floor, whilst I was busy trying to follow the unique and unpredictable course of the narrative, which invariably answered all of my set questions in a meandering fashion - and more besides. The locations for interviewing the participants varied: one candidate was interviewed at the same local college as the first interviewee; two were interviewed at WEA offices; one at a local library and another at a participant's home. All of the interviews lasted for the duration of 90 minutes.

### **Access to the Participants and their Consent**

Having sought approval from WEA Director Richard Bolsin in February 2006, I sent out an email invitation for research candidates (appendix 6) - to which there was no response. After discussing this issue with a local WEA Tutor Organiser, I was introduced to a senior figure of the Association, who met with me to find out more about the proposed research. As a result of this meeting she agreed to participate herself and, after having enjoyed a positive interviewing experience, recommended another suitable candidate (appendix 1). This pattern was repeated by each person that I interviewed, until I arrived at a cohort comprising of three men and three women who, at the time of interview, had been WEA Tutor Organisers for at least fifteen years, and were also active as Regional Educational Managers/Directors.

As can be seen from the letter of consent, I agreed to furnish each participant with their own copies of the recorded interview and transcription and they had the right - at any time - to contest the production/usage of their data, or if they wished, to withdraw from the study altogether. In an attempt to maintain participant confidentiality, I replaced all proper names with pseudonyms and omitted place names where possible. However, due to the

nature of the research and the size of the cohort, I made it clear that I could not guarantee anonymity.

## **The Participants**

The men and women who volunteered to take part in this research all gravitated to the WEA in very different ways, and as these brief introductory summaries suggest, for different reasons. Interestingly, many of the participants define themselves as either feminists, socialists, or anti-imperialists, demonstrating the centrality of their 'commitments' to their personal identity and, as we shall see, their professional roles too. Note: temporal references were accurate at the time of interview.

**Liz** was a former nurse who joined the WEA 20 years ago as a part-time tutor, before becoming a full-time Tutor Organiser. Now in her fifties, she continues to work for the WEA - as a Regional Manager - for the same locality. She describes herself as a feisty working class, anti-imperialist woman. This political identity is important to her and is directly linked with the WEA in some way, because it allows her to operate within these labels, and is why she works for the WEA.

**Pat** is now retired from the WEA, and started her professional life as a secondary school teacher, before joining the WEA for a 30 year career in which she acted as a voluntary member, student, Tutor Organiser, District Secretary and Senior Manager. Pat says the turning point for her, and her relationship with the WEA, was when she attended a joint WEA course called, 'A Woman's Place'. It was her first introduction into feminist theory, and it was the first time she experienced an environment of like-minded people where she could find a theoretical framework for her thoughts.

**Jim** has spent over 20 years with the WEA and first came into contact with the organisation as a student, on a short course, when he was a labourer. He then went on to become a part-time tutor, a full-time Tutor Organiser and is currently a Regional Education Manager. His own school experiences gave him his political perspective, and a mistrust of

formal examinations as an indication of intellectual capability and worth. Jim says working for the WEA has enabled him to engage working class adults who have been denied education, and get them to be inspired by literature, in the way it inspired him.

**Sheila** started her working life as a sewing machinist, before marrying a miner and having a family. She has worked for the WEA for over 20 years as a tutor and Tutor Organiser. Sheila describes the Miners' Strike in 1984/85 as a key event in her life, and it is when she became involved with a local women's group and the 'political side of things'. This was where her education started, as she was introduced to activities which encompassed everything from reading a novel, to doing some analysis of how this linked into her own life.

**Rob** has been associated with, and worked for the WEA for over 20 years: first as a voluntary member whilst a student at university, and then as a full-time Tutor Organiser. He formerly worked for a major trade union, and worked for an organisation that did campaign work for the unemployed. He currently works as a Regional Educational Manager. Rob describes himself as a socialist, and works for the WEA as he sees education as a tool by which a better world can be won.

**Nigel** was a research assistant for a brief period, and was attracted to the WEA because of his interest in trade unions, and more specifically shop steward education. He had no prior connections to the WEA before joining as a tutor, and says that, at the time he did not know what the organisation stood for. His career as a Tutor Organiser spans over 27 years and is currently a Regional Director. He doesn't see the WEA as ideologically driven, but as an organisation which offers marvellous opportunities to do interesting work.

## Representativeness of the Cohort

When I interviewed the participants in 2006-7, four of the six worked as Tutor Organisers/Regional Educational Managers in the North of England. To address this apparent imbalance, a senior figure in the WEA suggested early on in the project design, that I should interview a former Tutor Organiser from each of the twelve WEA districts throughout the British Isles. Even if I could have considered this as a lone, self-funded researcher, it would have proved an unnecessary challenge, as the data which resulted from just a small cohort of six, was rich and voluminous. It was clear from the literature on life history/narrative interviewing that this was to be expected - and hence why it is common practice for the research cohort to be very small - often limited to just two or three participants: making, "It possible to investigate in detail the relationship between the individual and the situation" (Kvale, 1996, p.103). This proved to be the case in this study, as I found handling the data from six participants to be extremely challenging, especially considering the lengthy timeframe of those narratives, and the detail resulting from the participants' 'narrative competence' (Willis, 1990, p.5).

I also found that, because of the amount of detail this method generated, a saturation point could be reached - even with a small cohort - and with hindsight perhaps three participants might have been sufficient. Dealing with even smaller numbers than six, would not have necessarily impaired the quality of the research in terms of its representativeness: for after all the main aim of this study was to understand how positivist educational policy has affected the transformative adult educational agenda, and not whether the impact of such changes has been uniformly experienced by former Tutor Organisers across the WEA. The research requirements, therefore, demanded a sample of individuals who were not only best positioned to offer critical insight, but who also had detailed knowledge about the WEA, and who could effectively communicate this. As Holstein and Gubrium advise, the idea is not so much to capture a representative segment of the population but to continuously solicit and analyse, "*Representative horizons of meaning*" (1995, p.74, my italics).

In terms of gender, class and ethnicity, the cohort represented a bit of a 'mixed bag', because although evenly split between male and female participants - with five out of six describing themselves as 'working class' - the entire cohort was white. I did not enquire about the age of the participants who, because of the criterion set for this study, tended to be older: ranging between the late forties to sixty. Information concerning sexual orientation or disability was not sought.

## **Handling the Data**

I spent well over a year handling the data: listening repeatedly to the taped interviews, "Paying close attention to...certain details of speech, such as pauses, non-lexical expressions, and speaker interruptions and overlaps" (Mishler, 1986, p.47). As a single 90 minute interview yielded an average of 40 pages of transcribed text, I sought secretarial help with the task. I jotted down the problems I encountered handling the data in my research journal:

### ***December 9th 2007:***

*"...verbal patterns of speech and written punctuation not only influence communication, but can radically change its meaning. What should I do? Attempt a comma or two, or just let it flow freely? In honesty I did a bit of both, with the justification that I only attempted punctuation, where, had I not, it would have been difficult to make sense of the narrative."*

To organise the data from these lengthy transcripts, I attempted to highlight any emerging themes using a coded colour scheme: isolating examples of congruence or divergence, and making a note of any inconsistencies and contradictions within each narrative. However, due to the reflexive and biographical structure of the data, this approach proved difficult and unproductive to pursue. As Riessman notes, "Stories told in research interviews are rarely so clearly banded, and locating them is often a complex and interpretative process" (1993, p.18). I also noted in my journal at the time, that my systematic attempts to disentangle the 'personal stuff' from their critical commentaries,

impoverished the richness of the narrative data as, "The process seemed to take all the life out of the narratives" (appendix 7).

The 'personal stuff' proved to be more than just entertaining embellishments to six differing perspectives about the effects of education policy, revealing in the telling, a complex symbiotic relationship between individual agents and the WEA: allowing agents an enviable level of autonomy to develop their interests and commitments, which were then used to further the Association's organisational concerns, as enshrined in its historic mission. Thus, alongside some of the issues that emerged, for example the funding of non-vocational adult education; the positivist quality assurance function; or the narrowing of the adult educational curriculum, an important meta-narrative surfaced, which in fact became the analytic focus of this research: the story of human agency and how organisations play a crucial role in either creating, nurturing and developing that agency, or subverting it.

In order to preserve the 'personal stuff' and not fragment the narrative content, a more creative approach was needed, and so, using over 95% of the original transcript material, I crafted six short stories from my own personal interpretation of the data, keeping, "The presentation of the...story in the words of the person telling the story" (Atkinson, 1998, p.2).

"Crafting profiles...is a way to find and display coherence in the constitutive events of a participants' experience, to share the coherence the participant has expressed, and to link the individual's experience to the social and organisational context within which he/she operates" (Seidman, 1991, p.92).

This represented a significant departure from what I had imagined would take place during this phase of the research: which was along the lines of working with the participants to identify relevant sections from their transcripts; lift them out in an unedited state; and provide commentary and analysis. However, as I have pointed out, the lengthy, biographical detail of the transcripts prohibited this approach, and would have anyway impoverished the quality of the data. Therefore, I alone made the decision to reconstruct

the narratives, in order to convey to the reader, the substance and style of the narrator as *I had experienced them*. The result is six unique, powerful narratives - that offer my interpretation - about how the participants have understood the educational climate to have changed, and the impact this has upon themselves, the WEA and the student body, to whom they are committed. Collectively, these six WEA voices represent what Morse (1994) has called the quintessential qualitative piece,

"The quintessential qualitative piece...is both representative and evocative; it tells an interesting and true story, it provides a sense of understanding and sometimes even personal recognition, and it conveys some movement and tension – something going on, something struggled against" (Morse, 1994, p.59).

### **Authenticity and Trustworthiness of the Research**

According to Atkinson, the life story interview is 'an artful endeavour' (1998, p.21) and should therefore be interpreted as an art form - with its own standards of reliability and validity – distinct from those used in quantitative research. Lincoln and Guba suggest alternative concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (1985, pp.289-332); or as I prefer: authenticity and trustworthiness (Atkinson, 1998, p.60). This is because, unlike quantitative research, qualitative enquiry has an, "Ineluctable element of intersubjectivity" (Ferrarotti, 1981, p.17) between the researcher and what they are researching.

The subjectivity of qualitative enquiry, and the fact that interviewers are part of the process - however much they try to be apart from it - (Ferrarotti, 1981; Mishler, 1986) has led some in the research community to consider it 'unscientific' (Kvale, 1996, p.61). Thus, in order to demonstrate the academic rigour of qualitative research, "There has been a long-standing recognition...of the need to document the process by which results and conclusions have been generated from the dataset" (Morse, 1994, p.366; Leiniger, 1990; Sandelowski, 1986; Guba, 1981; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). For this enquiry, I have endeavoured to do just that: leaving an 'audit trail' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, quoted in

Morse, 1994, p.24) which I hope, makes the research procedures, "Transparent and the results evident" (Kvale, 1996, p.252). As Giorgi explains,

"[The] chief point to be remembered in this type of research is not so much whether another position in respect to the data could be adopted...but whether the reader, adopting the same viewpoint as articulated by the researcher, can also see what the researcher saw, whether or not he agrees with it. That is the key criterion for qualitative research" (Giorgi, 1975, p.96).

To this end I have been explicit about my motivations in undertaking this research, and provided a full position statement in chapter one of this thesis: The Rationale for this Study. Although an outsider to the WEA, I clearly share some of the values it projects about education, and may therefore be considered by some as being biased towards the WEA. In response, I would say that my perspective when I began this research was insufficiently critical, rather than biased; a factor I hope I have addressed and demonstrated by presenting an alternative appraisal of the WEA in chapter three: A Critical History of the WEA. Keeping, and regularly updating, a personal research journal was another measure I introduced at the very beginning of my research journey, helping me to make explicit my own, 'theoretical and value assumptions' (Foley, 1999, p.11), as well as chart the course of what Morse rather accurately describes as, "A process of conjecture and verification, of correction and modification, of suggestion and defence" (1994, p.25).

Whilst the researcher has the ultimate responsibility to solicit, handle, organise, and interpret the data - and ensure a trustworthy process - the participants have a role to play in this too. The selection criteria that governed the participant sample for this study was particularly important in this respect, and the former Tutor Organisers' perspectives, collective knowledge, lengthy and varied experiences with the WEA - as well as their narrative competence, made them a very reliable and trustworthy source. This has undoubtedly contributed to the overall quality of this research and its 'believability' (Stivers, 1993, p.424). However, according to Lincoln and Guba, the true test of

authenticity is whether the data can, "Hold in some other context, or even in the same context at some other time" (1985, p.316). I put this to the test in the next two following chapters; in chapter five: I offer my interpretation of two very different narrative voices of the WEA to illustrate the relevance of Archer's morphogenetic framework; and in chapter six: I make use of all the participant data, to offer a detailed analysis of common themes that emerged across the dataset, which not only resonated with the issues presented in this thesis, but with the wider body of adult education literature.

## Summary

In this chapter I introduce the analytical framework used to interpret the participants' narratives, and explain the salient features of Archer's morphogenetic approach that are relevant to this study: namely how people become agents; what influences the development of that agency; and the role agency plays in transforming culture, structures, and society. Embedded in the critical realist tradition, Archer's theory confronts the limitations and constraints that individuals face, but argues that, whilst experience undoubtedly informs who we are as people and as potential agents, it does not determine us because we can reflect upon our social reality and change it. However, the process of becoming an agent - and ultimately an actor who can effect transformations in society - is not a 'given', but exists in potentia: dependent upon, and relative to, other emergent powers which also exist in potentia.

Deploying analytical dualism, this sophisticated social theory makes explicit the complexities involved with the development of human agency, making it ideally suited to the task of interpreting meaning from complex, personal narratives, which, because of their lengthy timeframe, are just as full of contradiction as insight. The rationale for the narrative method, and the process I undertook to handle, interpret, and present the data are also outlined in this chapter, and it includes excerpts taken from a research journal I kept at the time, which impart personal insights into every aspect of this process.

## Chapter Five: Narrative Analysis of Two Tales

This chapter presents two very different voices of the WEA that illustrate the reflexive, biographical nature of the data, and the 'narrative competence' of the participants as they relate their stories of why, and how, they became involved with the Association. Using the salient features of Archer's morphogenetic approach - as outlined in the last chapter - I draw on these narratives to highlight the centrality of their unique personal commitments, and show how an individual's identity emerges from these commitments. This not only contributes to a stable, continuous sense of self, but also informs their professional identity, shaping their understanding in very specific ways of how best to execute their societal role. These fascinating life histories essentially represent the story of how people make history, and reveal in the telling a complex and vitally important relationship with the WEA which, up until its restructure in 2004, was able to attract and nurture human agency.

Before introducing these personal perspectives however, it is useful to first consider how these narratives are to be read, and what other functions they could serve - besides communicating an individual's experience with a particular organisation - at a given point in time. As Seidman points out, telling stories, "Has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience" (1991, p.12), but they can also be a way to, "Leave a personal legacy for the future" (Atkinson, 1998, p.8). This aspect of story-telling has not been lost on the WEA, which has a long, active tradition of constructing its own politically and historically grounded narratives, rightly identifying the form as, "The supreme instrument for binding the values and goals...which motivate human conduct into situational structures of meaning" (Turner, 1980, p.167). This means the humble act of story-telling is, in fact, a highly sophisticated and reflective process, and can have any number of different functions, *but always has a point* (Wilensky, 1983).

Atkinson groups the 'classic' functions of the narrative into four categories: the psychological function that brings us into accord with ourselves; the social function which brings us into accord with others; the mystical or religious function that includes

experiences beyond everyday existence and the philosophical function that helps us to understand our place in the universe (1998, pp.9-11).

Categorising the narrative functions in this way may assist the reader in navigating and interpreting complex, multi-layered stories, but it should be remembered that the cohort's narratives are themselves interpretations, with the author's agential powers at the forefront of determining, "What gets included and excluded in narrativisation, how events are plotted, and what they are supposed to mean" (Riessman, 1993, pp.2-3). Thus, all narratives are necessarily bound up with the personal identity of the narrator, so whilst the participant data for this study reveals much about the WEA's organisational identity, it equally exposes individual personal identities at play - and interestingly - the symbiotic role between the development of personal identity and the continuing story of the WEA and its changing identity. Therefore, one way to approach the narratives that follow, is as organised personal reconstructions, which lend coherence and consistency to historical events (Mishler, 1986, p.67), that offer as part of the story, highly analytical perspectives with new insights and knowledge that were not apparent to the participants at the time (Herrnstein-Smith, 1980).

Taking each of these narratives in turn, they demonstrate, in very different ways, how people's powers emerge over time, and within an environment that is relational, involving the powers of other people, culture, and structures. However, as I have explained in chapter four, before any agential powers can emerge, the individual has to do some considerable work to develop a set of interests that give them their unique personal identity (Archer, 2000, p.83). These commitments are, from the outset, shaped by the individual's involuntaristic placement in society, which for Jim centres on the issue of social class, and for Pat, initially, focuses on gender. The continued affirmation of these class and gendered perspectives not only lend Jim and Pat a continuous sense of self (personal identity) and shape the acquisition of their social identities, but also inform the development of their corporate agency with the WEA. Referring to Archer's series of morphogenetic sequences, I will first look at how Jim has used his commitments to

animate the role of WEA Tutor Organiser, before going on to look at how Pat has done the same - paying attention to the area of play between people, culture, and structures - which apart from facilitating individual agency, has also shaped it in a particular way, ultimately influencing the direction of the Association itself.

### **Jim's Story:**

*"I grew up in what was once dubbed by BBC's Nationwide as "the dirtiest place in Europe" – which was in reality a proud pit village where all the men and women either worked in the coal or steel industries. Me' dad was an Irish labourer, and because we were Catholic (like many other kids in the village) I was bussed out to attend the Catholic Grammar School, run by the Brothers. I hated it cos' of the Brothers. They had brutal teaching methods and treated us pit village kids differently from the other 'hoity toity' children - and we were different - in terms of how we were dressed, our dialect and our culture. My confidence was badly knocked at that school, and I ended up believing that I was no good at learning. I left early on very bad terms in the Lower Sixth, plumping for the life of a labourer with me' dad and his mates.*

*I loved being around them' navvies; they would sing old Irish songs, tell stories, and I thought it were' all dead romantic! The first summer navvying were' great until winter set in and I then began scratching about for somat' else. Between short spells on' dole, I worked at' steelworks. Working in there were' like being part of a great epic: the sheer size of the place, the heat and the danger...it were' elemental! It were' around this time I started tekkin' off to me' local library, the one I'm trying to save now from closing down! There, I got into reading the Russian Classics, which blew me' mind. It were' like setting a spark onto one of these fiery chemicals, it just went fizz through me' head and I just thought: this is what I want to do for the rest of my life, is to read books like that.*

*One day I saw a WEA flyer advertising a 10-week English Literature course. I were' a bit mistrustful of formal schooling and teachers, but soon found that studying with the WEA was different. That first night I turned up to find that I already knew half the class, cos' they worked down' pit or in' steelworks! Our tutor were' enthusiastic about his subject and encouraged us all to get involved in literature. We could choose what novels we wanted to do, we could talk about the books we read, and we often kicked off the evening by way of a personal contribution, such as poem or short story.*

*It were' because of me' tutor that I went onto evening school to do me' A levels. I didn't enjoy it a raight' lot, but got through it all and put mesen' forward for uni'. I chose somewhere known for its radical literature department, but by the time I got there all the big*

names had left! Once again, us' working class northerners stuck out in the class, but I quite liked me' exotic status cos' I knew things about real life that a lot of these students didn't. That's why I weren't really into student politics, it were' all a bit too theoretical for my liking and the authorities ended up smashin' em' anyway.

After uni' I did a PGCE [Post Graduate Certificate in Education] cos' I had this noble idea of inspiring ordinary working class kids with a passion for literature. I thought: that's how we'll ferment revolution and change. I did me' school placement at this posh school and as soon as I walked through the door, I got the same feelings of oppression I'd had as a kid. After that, I made sure I did the FE option. I knew then that I was looking out for a chance to get in with the WEA, but there were no jobs - though I did get the chance to teach A' level literature at FE [Further Education College] - on a short-term contract to cover someone's maternity leave. My old WEA tutor recommended me as he thought I'd be good at it.

Once that job finished I were' at a bit of a loss, and so I started a PhD about the poetry of Northern Ireland and the 'Troubles'. It were' the early 80's and Thatcher was coming down hard on the miners. We were having lots of rallies and stuff - even me' dad was out picketing and I was kind of sitting on me arse really, spouting fine words and I was particularly aware of going back down South, where they had absolutely no idea what was going on, and I kept coming back up, finding myself sitting in a nice warm library, reading the Times Education Supplement, and I was thinking: this is not raight'.

One day I picked up the Times Education Supplement - and what should be in the situations vacant, but a WEA Tutor Organiser post - it was my tutor's old job! I thought, it's a sign, it's a sign! So I applied for the job, got it and jacked the PhD. From then on I was a WEA Tutor Organiser. At last! I thought, my chance has come to inspire working class people, get them writing cos' they just lacked the confidence. It may have been me' mate who said this, but every time a working class person lifts a pen, it's a political act. People in the mines and in the steel works were factory fodder; they were producing the wealth of this country and they were shit upon, and I thought that was more than intolerable, and so from my point of view the base-line was to tell those stories - and you could do it through literature. Except it weren't that easy! Me and me' mate had to organise all sorts of writer's workshops, plays, dramas, puppet shows, as well as put on an annual gala to try an' encourage people to have a go.

People might not have been interested in lectures about Marxist economics, but they flocked to learn about "Who runs our town?" During the mid-80's the miners' strikes and high unemployment had radicalised a lot of people, and even though we say the WEA is a non-party political organisation, politics spilled over into it. I always try to keep my Labour

*Party self and my WEA self-separate, but how does John Donne put it? There was an interanimation of the two, they fed each other, you know. So we linked up with a variety of individuals and organisations – political and non-political - that wanted to work with pit communities. There weren't enough venues then and so we lobbied for em' so adults could meet and learn; we lobbied for resources and got all sorts of things going off.*

*[N]ow I don't meet bunches of people anymore. I'm a manager and we have become creatures of the LSC, [Learning and Skills Council] so we do what they tell us now, and that's from the thread to the needle. It saddens me profoundly to look at the state of the WEA today; I don't think there is any activism left in that sense. There's still this belief that it's just a temporary phase: an interregnum, and we will get back, once we're financially viable, to the old kind of WEA, but I don't think we will. In fact, I know we won't because a lot of the people that the WEA was built upon have left. There's no room now to do the taster courses in a community centre, or to see if we can get a women's course here, or a writer's group. The LSC wants everybody to be dancing to the same tune.*

*We're inspected by the Adult Learning Inspectorate, [ALI] who've got a very narrow notion of what is good quality - and it's quantitative often, as well as qualitative. They'll tell you that it isn't, but it is really. Since we have started to do the LSC's bidding, the whole voluntary movement has weakened, and I have to say in most parts of xxx the voluntary movement is dead, it's not just dying or moribund, it's dead. That's a huge issue for a voluntary organisation. A lot of what we do now centres on Skills for Life, which is fine at one level - at another it is offensively patronising. The autodidact tradition has gone - you've got to come through a system now. Very soon you're going to have to be doing an accredited course. The WEA was about courses that are not accredited - that was its virtue. It's not accredited - you don't have to do a certificate - it's not like school. Well now it is like school, or it's becoming more like school. The WEA was known for being a broad church that embraced diversity, and even had an active international dimension, with the CICERO programme, but we don't do this anymore either. We are not any different from FE.*

*Some WEA people think we will return to our core values, which are around spending time with people, putting on learning that is negotiated on their terms, and dealing with the barriers they face in accessing learning, but I don't think we will go back. The changes have destroyed the philosophical core of the WEA. This is it now. The period of senior mismanagement and financial loss put us in a predicament and that meant the WEA was on its knees, begging to the only funder left, which was the LSC. The LSC sets the agenda now, not the Association's membership - and the Adult Learning Inspectorate decides what is, or isn't good quality, based on their very thin understanding of the WEA and its work.*

*It's true we have RARPA, [Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement] a comprehensive process for every course, providing feedback and checks for the learning journey; and we have a framework which inspects the quality of teaching in the WEA, but I don't think these things have improved the WEA. The only difference now is that we can evidence quality by a bit of paper and ticking boxes, whereas before the quality framework was imposed it was not expressed in this way. It's now easier to tick, therefore, in this kind of accounting society that we've got, what do they call it, bean counting? You can weigh in can't you, yet human beings are not like that, but the system says they are. According to today's ALI and LSC criteria, no education that I ever had would have been any good at all - it would have failed probably because the requisite paperwork was not there. An inspirational lecturer who came in and held you spellbound for 45 minutes cuts absolutely no ice at all today.*

*But adult learning is not about individuals tekkin' courses, it's about collective, transformative experiences, and this kind of learning has a ripple effect on the rest of the community. Women for example who, have gone on from running the parent and toddler course, to becoming a bit more involved in the school when the kids go to it, then might become a friend of the school - might become a school governor - might become a classroom assistant, you know, and then ... they might go to university. Education should be liberationist not oppressive, as the state school system is. It shouldn't be based on a deficit model, as Skills for Life is, it should be based on people being used as living resources, who are able to contribute positively to their community.*

*Transformative, collective learning is multi-national in its roots and continues throughout the course of a life: it doesn't finish. Somewhere an assumption has crept in, and taken hold in education policy, that learning has a neat beginning and end. It doesn't. We've got built into the system now, that they'll come and look at your registers and say that person's been on that art class for 3 years...what's going off here? He's painting. It takes a life to become good, you know. Adult education needs to be accessible throughout one's life and resourced, so that people can learn what and whenever they choose. It means you get clued up as to how the system works, and how to work the system for yourself, and for your kids, and for your neighbours, and for your street and for your community; it means getting involved in issues. Education and democracy are interlinked.*

*The WEA is in an odd sort of situation now, cos' on the one hand we are tekkin' LSC money and deliverin' the Government agenda, and at the same time challenging it - with the likes of NIACE [National Institute of Adult & Continuing Education] - but we are not getting very far in saving adult education. Having said that, it's all gonna' come crashing down soon, and the Government strategy is gonna' be shown for what it is: a mixed up, unworkable combination of Thatcherite self-help and American pious thinking. The*

*Government say they want people to participate more at neighbourhood level, tek' more responsibility, but they're not puttin' in the resources! The WEA could have a role in Community Development, but the model adopted by the Government doesn't allow it. The funding mechanism actively thwarts the WEA from doing such work! At the same time, they band about the 'S' word: sustainability – forcing all these neighbourhood activities to become self-financing, which is just not possible. Once the European money stops, lots of adult educational activities will cease, and loads of workers will disappear.*

*The Government, I think has a very functional notion of what adult education should be about: it's to serve, it's to operate digits. The biggest barrier to people participating in learning, or gettin' involved in anything, is confidence and the liberationist perspective on education is to give working class people confidence. Self-esteem in working class communities is damaged and it teks' a lot to build that up. By contrast, the middle classes ooze confidence and are brought up to assume positions of power. In terms of class, things haven't changed much over the years, and there are huge numbers of working class students droppin' out of university. It is ironic that New Labour has done more to dismantle adult education than the Tories ever did! Far from making good on their election promise of diversity in adult education, they have standardised it along very narrow lines.*

*I didn't ever expect the WEA to be mainstream, but I did think we could have carried on the role of informing civic leaders of the future, and in developing alternative methods of adult learning. It's ironic, that the very political leaders that have benefited from a WEA education, are now backing a policy that will deny this to those who most need it! The Labour Party has also had some very illustrious academics, from the best educational tradition, to help them shape their adult educational policy, but the execution of that policy has been drawn up by civil servants who want to make short term gains, making the contradiction between Government rhetoric and action tragic. This strategy is hitting the WEA and Northern College very hard now.*

*The Government play other linguistic tricks too, like placing the responsibility to deliver this rhetoric at the door of local strategic partnerships, which then don't get the funding from the state to do so! The WEA have recently changed a lot of their terms too. What used to be called the Central Body is now, "Corporate Services" - it's indicative of wider changes since the restructure. Before centralisation, the WEA had an intellectual life, and policy papers were circulated amongst all for their opinions. It's a rarity to hear local and regional voices now as they are viewed as anachronistic. So many changes have happened over the last 5 years, and these have always been defended as a necessary emergency measure, to enable the WEA to survive. The thing is, the finance question is inextricably linked to the quality assurance agenda and inspections, and this has changed the very core of the WEA.*

*Today's world is one of huge inequalities, where the focus is on style rather than substance, and rhetoric plays a huge role in this. Spin can put millions into an economy overnight, and politicians are letting big business mould communities, rather than empower community members themselves to work together at resolving local issues. Let's be clear, business involvement in the community is not done out of altruism, they stand to gain - and this is also part of New Labour's business strategy. If people don't like it, they are parodied as being anti-entrepreneurial, anti-education and anti-training, which I find offensive. The truth on' it, is that they don't want to tek' part in it, cos' they've sussed it out and see it for what it is: a sham. In many respects New Labour is little different to Thatcher, who said there was no such thing as society, just individuals. It's very confused because, they think they're talking about communities and neighbourhoods, but they really see it as done by individuals.*

*What I loved most about the WEA has gone and I can't see it ever coming back. The resurrection of the voluntary movement might bring the Association back in touch with its original mission, but that isn't happening. We have to rebuild the voluntary movement or it is finished; and actually, what is happening now to the WEA can be seen as part of a wider historical process regarding working class movements. It's shedding a lot of these progressive organisations. The WEA are good at engaging the hard to reach, and people with learning difficulties – but the WEA won't be able to transform these people into activists, which is vital if we are to reignite the voluntary movement. The LSC might request this kind of work from the WEA, and it is valuable – but it's not the mission of the WEA... the creature that the WEA's becoming is not what it was, and I can't see it finding its way back."*

## **Narrative Analysis - Jim**

### **The Role of Commitments in the Emergence of Agency**

Central to Jim's personal identity is the geography and industry of place, and the working class people who lived and laboured in the mining village where he grew up - cited in the extract as, "*the dirtiest place in Europe.*" His Irish roots add an important religious dimension to his identity as a working class Northerner, enabling him to access a Catholic Grammar School, which arguably, gives him a better standard of education than his peers attending state schools in the village. However, the discrimination he experienced at this school from the Brothers: religious men with a duty of pastoral care, but also teaching professionals, was formative in laying the foundations for what would become two long-

lasting commitments for Jim: a deep mistrust of formal education and a passionate hatred of class discrimination. These experiences had a profound emotional impact, and material consequences, that heavily influenced the rest of Jim's working life, causing him for a long time to reject opportunities of formal higher education, and return instead to the familiarity of the pit village, and to a life of labouring.

However, the very different expectations surrounding a Grammar School education introduced, theoretically at least, the possibility of altering Jim's involuntaristic class placement, and had he reassessed and 'refreshed' his initial commitments, he might not have experienced the considerable class contradictions which characterise his early working life, and time at university. By choosing not to transvalue his position on social class however, Jim becomes caught, "traversing two different worlds" – the world of 'real' work and the world of academia - finding only partial fulfilment with either, as he switches from learning to labouring, and back to learning. Yet, I do not interpret this as indecisiveness or that Jim is 'drifting' because, as his early and continuing commitments show, he clearly cares a great deal about a number of things. At this juncture, I would argue that Jim has simply not yet succeeded in finding a place to belong, or pursue an activity in which he can meaningfully invest himself within a system he detests.

Unwilling to consider the most important aspects of his identity as being mutually exclusive, that is to say: being 'working class' and an 'academic', Jim finds himself alienated, but in continuing to traverse these different worlds, he principally achieves two things: he makes visible - and thereby challenges, the fundamental assumptions and prejudices that govern the British class system; and also - using these experiences - he deepens his initial commitments against class based inequalities, to formulate his own political world-view.

Seen in this context, Jim's choices in both labouring and learning are neither incidental nor accidental, but a personal venture into the worlds of theory and praxis, where his experiences with people, culture, and structures lead him to develop a form of agency, committing him to informal, transformative education for the purpose of achieving a more

'tolerable' society. So it comes as no surprise that, when he eventually returns to formal learning, he specifically chooses to study Russian Literature at a university with a 'radical' reputation, and later for his PhD, settles on the poetry of Northern Ireland and the 'Troubles', effectively aligning the personal with the political.

Whilst Jim rationalises and intellectualises his experiences of class, he is still confronted with, and has to negotiate, the personal challenges of living through the contradictions of class inequality, which resurface when he returns to formal education at a university in the South of England. As the lone, working class, Northerner he is once again an outsider, but in contrast to his earlier experiences of being different at school, Jim interprets his difference positively, believing his knowledge of 'real life' gives him a special 'exotic' status over his peers, who Jim describes as "a bit too theoretical."

Jim's realist perspective on life is illuminating, and we learn that, despite his Grammar school education and his academic activity at the highest level, he continues to value and sometimes even romanticise a definition of work still widely accepted amongst many working class communities today: that of physical labour. This gives rise to further sources of tension and contradiction - as well as feelings of guilt for Jim - who knows that, unlike his working class family, friends and peers, he is not consigned to lead the hard life of a labourer,

*"I were' at a bit of a loss and so started a PhD about the poetry of Northern Ireland and the 'Troubles'. It were' the early 80's and Thatcher was coming down hard on the miners. We were having lots of rallies and stuff - even me' dad was out picketing and I was kind of sitting on me arse really, spouting fine words ... and I kept coming back up, finding myself sitting in a nice warm library, reading the Times Education Supplement, and I was thinking: this is not raight'."*

To resolve these contradictions, and address the inequality of opportunity that causes these feelings of guilt, Jim trains as a teacher, hoping to "ferment revolution and change," by inspiring working class students with a passion for literature. These initial attempts to

consciously influence people, and transform the culture and structure of formal state education, are quite naïve - and of course fail - but represent an important phase in the contingent evolution of Jim's agential powers, as he comes to the realisation that, however passionate, his individual efforts will always be easily overwhelmed by the considerable powers and properties that constitute formal education.

Although these experiences soon end his, "noble idea of inspiring ordinary working class kids," it does not cause him to completely abandon his commitments – only adjust them - by looking for a more realistic setting in which to develop his agency. As Jim says, "I knew then that I was looking out for a chance to get in with the WEA ..." Jim recognises the WEA as an organisation that can offer him what he needs: a professional position in which he can fully invest himself in, and one that will offer him opportunities to further develop into a corporate agent, a necessary metamorphosis for those wishing to become social actors: agents capable of effecting change in society at all levels. Jim gets his chance, when he learns his old WEA tutor has left his job,

*"One day I picked up the Times Education Supplement, and what should be in the situations vacant but a WEA Tutor Organiser post - it was my tutor's old job! ... So I applied for the job, got it and jacked the PhD. From then on I was a WEA Tutor Organiser! ...At last! I thought, my chance has come to work with working class people, to inspire them and get them writing."*

Drawing on Archer's theory of human agency as presented in chapter four, this is the point where Jim acquires his social identity, marking his elaboration into a social agent - which using the morphogenetic sequence - might look like this,

## Figure 4: The Acquisition of Jim's Social Identity

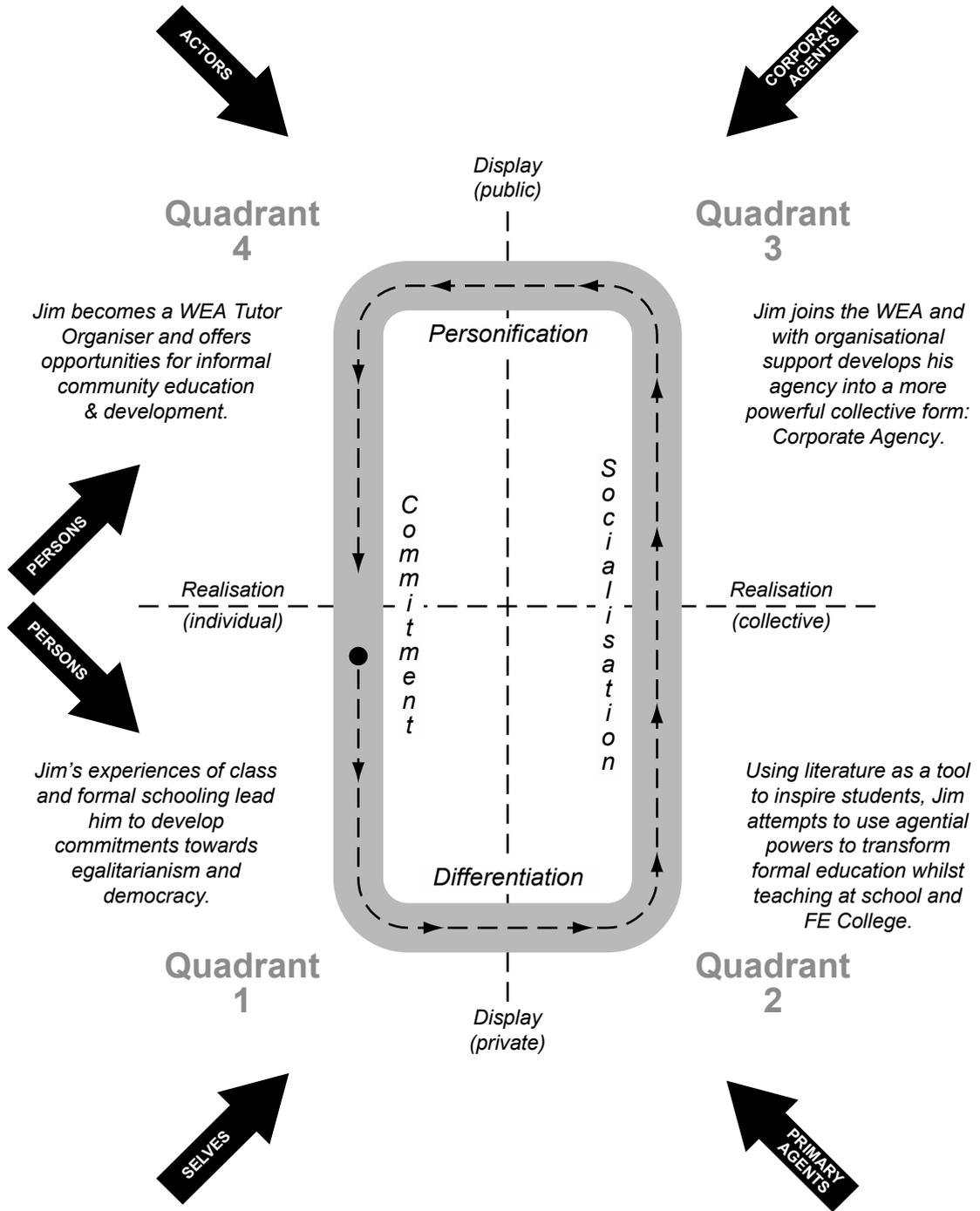
The conditioned 'Me' – Primary Agent. Jim's experiences of class	
T1 Developing commitments to egalitarianism and democracy	T2
The interactive 'We' – Corporate Agent. Jim as WEA Branch Secretary; P/T F.E tutor	
Jim develops collective agency around his interests & emerging commitments	T3
T4 The elaborated 'You' – Personal + Social Identity. Jim as WEA Tutor Organiser	
Jim deploys corporate agency in line with his commitments; writing workshops etc.,	(New T1)

(Adapted from Archer, 2000, p.296)

As all elaborations are contingent phenomena, they bring into play crucial spacio-temporalities that shape the distinct, but ever-changing, powers and properties of people, culture, and structures that have been formative in Jim's life. Archer's realist account of the development of the stratified human being (2000, p.260) proves extremely useful here in simplifying this complex, dynamic process. Consequently, it is possible to locate and track the development of Jim's early commitments, delineate the influences and motivations that might have played an important part in forging - both the development of Jim's agency and its deployment at each stage - as well as isolate the unique contribution Jim has made to the WEA, an organisation which, as he describes, has directly and indirectly influenced his agency and nurtured his professional praxis over many years.

Jim's contribution, as represented in quadrant 4 (figure 4.1) is the point of further elaboration, where Jim moves from being a social agent to an actor, capable of influencing the kind of work the WEA does, and therefore capable also of effecting wider transformational change. In Jim's case, this means raising the profile of the Arts; political education in community settings; and increasing the number of new agents - especially female agents - by enabling them to assume leadership roles within the community, or become WEA lay tutors.

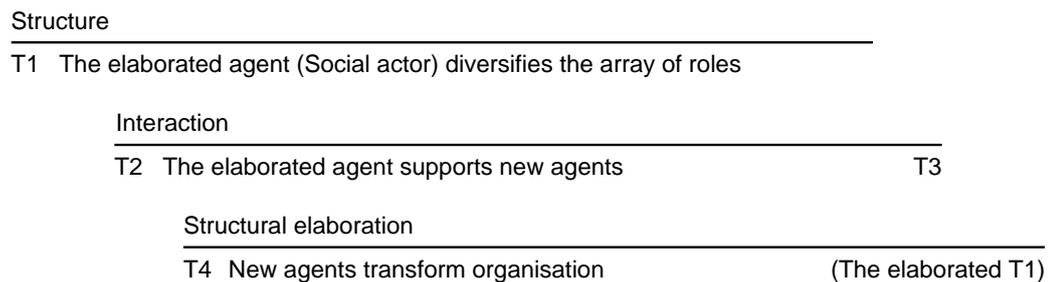
Figure 4.1: Realism's account of the development of the stratified human being



(Adapted from Archer, 2000, p.254)

Introducing greater numbers of working class women into the WEA - not just as students, but as tutors and leaders - sets in motion a new wave of grass roots activity that has widely been acknowledged for bringing about a WEA renaissance of the 90's. This, in turn, has arguably triggered a much more fundamental change, as in 2011 the WEA appointed Ruth Spellman as its Chief Executive: the first woman to ever lead the organisation which, historically, has been dominated by white, and largely middle class men. In this way a 'double morphogenesis' occurs, because the actions of the elaborated agent (principally through role diversification) causes the structures to also be transformed, which, under the right emergent conditions, leads to an increase in corporate agents.

**Figure 4.2: The Elaboration of Structures and Agents in the Double Morphogenesis**



(Adapted from Archer, 1995, p.76)

Whilst it is clear that there can be no elaboration of structures without the human agent, it is also clear that any elaborations that do occur as a result of human effort, are necessarily mediated by the distinct powers and properties of other people, cultures (organisational or societal), and the structures in which the agent operates. However, by far the most powerful phenomena affecting the development, facilitation, and emergence of human agency are time *and space*, as Jim's narrative graphically illustrates. To explain: had Jim not been a labourer during that particularly cold winter, and had he not sought the warmth of his local library at that particular time, he may never have been introduced -

and inspired - by the volumes of Russian literature on the shelves there. Furthermore, had he not continued to read at this library, he may have never picked up the WEA flyer inviting him to study literature, which, apart from introducing Jim to the WEA and restoring his faith in learning, brought him into contact with someone who was to be a very influential figure in Jim's life: his WEA tutor, who encouraged his passion for literature and empowered him to take up formal higher education.

Given Jim's experiences, it is unsurprising that once he becomes a WEA Tutor Organiser, he chooses literature and creative forms of expression as vehicles to inspire and engage the working class in learning, as well as raise their political consciousness. Another spacio-temporal consideration for Jim's success in this respect - apart from his intimate knowledge and experience of living in a pit village community - was the increasing politicisation and radicalisation of ordinary people who, disadvantaged by Thatcher's monetarist policies of the 80's, were now eager to understand more about what was happening to their community, and what they could do in response. Such are the combined powers of time and space, that one might reasonably suggest they influence human reflection itself, which, according to Archer, is the quintessential human activity that defines our singularly unique form of existence, and the driving force that shapes it.

This is evident from Jim's 'window on the world' which - influenced by his early and continued experiences of discrimination and struggle - is framed by a class conscious perspective. It is through this lens that Jim interprets information from the world around him, and, as I have shown in this chapter, results in lasting commitments that combine the personal with the political. This ultimately leads him to the WEA, and to a role where he can invest himself, deploying the kind of agency he hopes will affect class inequalities. Jim's political reflexivity equally informs his views about the possible impact of the WEA's organisational restructure, extending beyond his individual frustrations at the loss of autonomy that he personally experiences, to focus on the long term effects it will have on transformative, adult education, and by definition, on what some consider to be the last bastion of democratic education (Jarvis, 1987).

Although the new regime raises concerns for Jim as an educator, for example the standardisation of WEA education; the quantitative approach to quality assurance; the increasing focus on specific disadvantaged groups (such as those with learning disabilities or poor basic education), he responds primarily as a *political activist*: viewing the changes as a threat to the WEA, to the voluntary movement, to the political education and consciousness raising of the working class, and thus, to activism. Intimately aware of both the theory and praxis that is required to support societal transformation, Jim is firmly wedded to an educative approach that fosters grass roots activity, which the performative instrumentalism of the new regime – underpinned by educational policy - will almost certainly eradicate. If allowed to take hold, these changes will transform adult learning: making it more like schooling, but because formal schooling makes no or little attempt to address issues of social justice, or deal with relevant local community concerns, it will not be able to, "transform...people into activists."

This, of course is entirely the point about instrumental education, which is why, unlike some of his colleagues, Jim believes the changes ushered in by the restructure to be neither temporary, nor a remedial measure, but part of an on-going historical ideological process that is shedding progressive working class organisations,

*"There's still this belief that it's just a temporary phase: an interregnum, and we will get back - once we're financially viable - to the old kind of WEA, but I don't think we will. In fact, I know we won't because a lot of the people that the WEA was built upon have left...The changes have destroyed the philosophical core of the WEA. This is it now. The period of senior mismanagement and financial loss put us in a predicament and that meant the WEA was on its knees, begging to the only funder left which was the LSC. The LSC sets the agenda now, not the Association's membership - and the Adult Learning Inspectorate decides what is, or isn't good quality, based on their very thin understanding of the WEA and its work."*

Fully cognisant of how the restructure will affect the philosophy and practices of the WEA, and keenly aware of how this, in turn, will affect working class communities, Jim is angry at the Association for having got itself into such a vulnerable position. Having failed

the inspection, and still reeling from an internal financial crisis, the WEA is poorly positioned to challenge the extremely powerful positivist discourse in education, or indeed, to expose the false rhetoric of the politicians, who have appropriated the language of emancipation to advance the new educational order. Consequently, the WEA becomes more dependent upon the Government - its principal funder - thereby deepening the contradictions already existent in a relationship that has never been straight-forward,

*“The WEA is in an odd sort of situation now, cos’ on the one hand we are tekkin LSC money and deliverin’ the Government agenda and at the same time challenging it with the likes of NIACE.”* (National Institute of Adult & Continuing Education)

Towards the end of his narrative Jim articulates a fanciful hope that, *“the Government strategy is gonna’ be shown for what it is, a mixed up, unworkable combination of Thatcherite self-help and American pious thinking,”* but even if this did transpire, his emphatic tone suggests that the damage has already been done, and what Jim loved about the WEA has already gone,

*“I can’t see it ever coming back. The resurrection of the voluntary movement might bring the Association back in touch with its original mission, but that isn’t happening. We have to rebuild the voluntary movement or it is finished.”*

However, it is not just the WEA and transformative adult education that is under serious threat: Jim’s investment in his role as WEA Tutor Organiser is in jeopardy too, as this instrumental educational climate does not value the things Jim loved to do - and which were necessary to do - in order to engage the disadvantaged in socially purposeful education,

*“[N]ow I don’t meet bunches of people anymore. I’m a manager and we have become creatures of the LSC, [Learning and Skills Council] so we do what they tell us now and that’s from the thread to the needle... There’s no room now to do the taster courses in a community centre, or to see if we can get a*

*women's course here, or a writer's group. The LSC wants everybody to be dancing to the same tune."*

This situation will, over time, prove difficult for Jim as he tries to interpret his new role as Regional Educational Manager vis-à-vis his personal commitments, but considering the journey Jim has made, it is hardly likely that he will transvalue those commitments differently as this would compromise and undermine his personal identity (Archer, 2000, p.305). Yet if he continues in this role, he will experience a growing sense of dissatisfaction, as his commitments and professional role become out of kilter and, "When personal identity can no longer be expressed through social identity, then...bad faith characterises the continuing role incumbent" (Archer, 2000, p.304). In this situation, Jim will begin to 'drift' as he tries to find pockets of opportunity to practice what he believes in, or subvert that which he does not.

Despite sharing many of Jim's concerns about the WEA and adult education, the narrative tone and content of Pat's story strikes a notable contrast - presenting a very different kind of corporate agent – who, overtime, seems to have adapted her initial commitments from women's consciousness raising, to acquire a more strategic organisational focus. Early on in the narrative though, it is clear that like Jim, Pat's agential development has also been influenced by certain interests, which in this case centres on feminism; and also, that these interests have been similarly nurtured via WEA short courses, which in this example turns out to be a Joint University/WEA introductory course on feminist thought. A further commonality in Jim and Pat's agential development is the role played by their respective tutors, who proved to be not only inspirational educators but key players in paving the way for them both to become adult educators with the WEA.

However, amongst the similarities there are some remarkable differences and these will be the focus for my analysis here, because although Pat describes herself as a feminist with 'solidly working class' roots, these aspects of her identity do not define her in the same way that Jim's social class and birthplace define him. Pat's gendered experience, which has been altogether different from Jim's experience of class, has also had a very

different kind of impact upon her as a WEA agent, and her narrative reveals a working environment that has in some ways been more challenging for her than it was for Jim. Yet in spite of these challenges Pat finds ways to operationalise her early feminist commitments to pioneer a new strand of work that proves quite controversial, not only because it introduces women's studies to an organisation dominated by men, but because the new programmes shift the focus away from the Branches towards communities and triggers fundamental changes to both the Tutor Organiser role and how adult education for disadvantaged groups is funded.

The highly reflexive narrative that follows communicates this, and much more, revealing an acute awareness of how the distinct powers of culture, structure and people also exert their influence across time and space to effect *further* elaborations in areas where agents have spearheaded transformation. As we shall see from Pat's account, agents continuously evaluate these 'additional' elaborations, causing them to review and perhaps transvalue their initial commitments. This makes her story a useful and interesting comparison to Jim's because it illustrates how Pat, unlike Jim, against the backdrop of a changing educational climate, modifies her concerns throughout her career to emerge as an adaptable agent who is unlikely to 'drift' because she has become adept at exploiting afresh, the new and different opportunities that present themselves with each phase of morphogenesis.

### **Pat's Story:**

*"My journey was a mixed bag really. I initially got teacher trainer qualifications through the traditional route, so I can't claim to be that wonderful stereotypical person - coming through from the grassroots of the WEA - and out at the other end as a tutor in Northern College! The first time I came across the WEA was when my husband got a job as a WEA Tutor Organiser. He worked from our home in the front room, and so I became his secretary, by default really and just got kind of pulled in. Then I attended Joint University/WEA classes where my husband was working, and at this time I also got involved with the Branch for a while, and by incremental steps I got more involved with the WEA.*

*I suppose the key turning point for me, and my relationship with the WEA, was when I went to a course with the intriguing title of 'A Woman's Place!' That was really my first introduction to feminist theory, and it was the first time I was in an environment where people were thinking the same way as I was. Many of us were middle class by virtue of the fact that we were professionals - or had gone through university - but my roots are quite solidly working class, and I think it's also true to say that the majority of them were socialist feminists.*

*The tutor was an extraordinary woman who had a particularly significant effect on my life, in terms of the way I taught, and I subsequently did a Masters. I was just reaching out for courses and people who were building my way of thinking, and who I felt comfortable with, and who I shared a lot with. So we spawned all sorts of things: consciousness raising groups and all of that, which I look back on and value enormously. I know that all sounds very pompous these days, but it was quite revelatory in those heady days of the mid to late 70's. Then the tutor got a full-time job and recommended that I pick up her tutoring role, and so I picked that up and was teaching on a New Opportunities for Women course - which is the best teaching I have ever done in my life - and the best teaching environment I have ever been in in my life.*

*I applied for a post with the WEA, as there was a lot of creativity, and they were pioneering the way with the New Opportunities for Women courses. Our mission to raise the consciousness of women, and we did that. Our courses were hugely popular and we had to struggle, both academically, and within the WEA... there was not a universal welcome for feminists and women's studies - it was a battle. The District Secretary preferred to let you get on with - it if you were getting on with it - and if you weren't getting on with it, he found that difficult to manage. On the whole, it was a period of great enthusiasm and energy; most people there were buzzing, but not everybody was... Those who weren't engaged with socialism or feminism, just got on with their job really, and I think it was probably an uncomfortable place for them to be in those days, because the WEA's always had a history of being associated with the Left. It isn't anywhere near as much today, so there were internal struggles with colleagues, who thought that feminism was a silly distraction by middle class women, and that we should be at the barricades - just fighting for socialism.*

*By the 90's, the WEA dropped the notion of Tutor Organisers working with the unemployed, and moved to geographic posts. I didn't want to join what was then called xxxxx District, because it was a dull and dire district at the time, and had gone through all sorts of crises. In my view, and indeed it was the view of other people, my [old] District was a very strong, powerful one with lots of exciting developments. It was also a bit anarchic, a bit maverick, but the WEA at that time was not an integrated organisation and*

*we were funded largely on an independent basis, and there was a great deal of passion about that autonomy, and by this time I was passionate about the WEA, and so I didn't want to leave.*

*Everyone at one time worked from their home and equipped themselves, so people worked from their back bedroom and they hand-wrote the stuff, and then computers came in and I remember once, a District Secretary who had to become computer literate, used to come in and hang his coat on it! [the computer] I think he never did become computer literate, he avoided doing it, and that's why things had to change. Gradually and grudgingly, we have reached a stage now where, for those who work from home, their equipment is all provided and kept up to date.*

*During the 80's and 90's there was a push to get people out into offices, and at that time there was this great big debate about whether or not there should be an integrated Association, and that caused a great deal of pain. I shifted from arguing that we should remain discrete Districts, to becoming integrated, partly because some of the District Secretaries in other regions were incompetent, and because - even though we were a loose Association - we had this commitment of being a whole Association, and so we needed to act collectively to resolve that. I knew it would mean the imposition of more regulation and control, but I think really it was appropriate, and it's what's kept the WEA alive. I think we probably have more influence as a whole integrated Association, and it's what will possibly keep us alive in the future.*

*It did have some negative effect: I think the voluntary membership felt that they had lost some of their autonomy, but others are remarkably impervious to the super structures around them, and they just carry on with their own work and it doesn't really matter to them. They balk against some of the constraints that we have to operate by, but they plod on, you know, regardless. So it was a key turning point, absolutely no doubt about that. You could more or less put a line down the middle of it, and see that those who wanted to be integrated, and this is interesting - because I was initially on the other side of that line. Those who were arguing for integration, were in fact, those people who wanted to see us moving out into the community - but felt that we couldn't do that because there was opposition from the Branches - and to a certain extent that's true, and it's still true that the Branches are not particularly engaged with the Community Programme.*

*Those of us on the discrete side were seen to be the 'Traditionalists' wanting to hang onto the Liberal Programme and, ipso facto, were not as 'radical' as the others. Now that's a crude distinction, and of course those of us who were on the side of the discrete resented that characterisation, but really when I analysed why I was on the discrete side it was because I was in the xxxxx District, and I didn't want our whole approach and practice to be influenced by the others. Also the xxxxx District had a very big Community Programme*

*- and it had been the pioneer of the women's studies work across the whole Association - so we didn't need these other bodies determining our curriculum, cause' we felt we were pioneers! So the opposition in my District about the whole integrated thing was more about defending our own position, and I have to say that position was bolstered by the fact that we did have a very very good, and quite radical, governing body.*

*That tension between the traditionalists and the newer staff that were coming in pervaded the whole Association. Also, you would find that, across the whole Association, the Branch members were nervous about the shift to the Community Programme. When I came in, I remember they had this very big traditional programme, and in comes a very irate vicar and described me as this "young thing" (and I was in my mid-forties, so it is only in the WEA that I could be described as a "young thing") who had all these radical ideas! The radical idea was that: I was trying to persuade them of the value of having some accredited provision on their programme, and they never heard the likes of it, so the vicar stormed out!*

*When I talk about being 'radical' - I mean engaging more with the original purpose of the WEA - having the guts to go out and develop new activity; having the courage to explore new ideas; take risks; and accept failure. I remember asking them what they wanted from their Tutor Organiser and a very honest reply from the Chair of the Branch at the time said: 'we want you to leave us alone to get on with our programme' and he said: 'we do recognise that we should be attracting more people, we should be reaching out into the community, we don't know how to do it, so you get on with that side'...So that may typify the relationship that was evolving before we became an integrated Association - between those members of staff who promoted the Liberal Programme through the Branches - and those of us who began to develop activity outside the Branches.*

*Even today, there are some long standing members of the voluntary movement who say that: the role of the Tutor Organisers is to support the Branches, and is not about going out and developing independent programmes, which weren't related to the Branches. But if we had left it to the Branches, there would never have been the Community Programmes, Skills for Life, or Women's Studies. Of course the speed of the Community Programmes picked up when we became an integrated Association.*

*There was the recognition that we needed to be out more in the community; and what was sad to my mind, but I was fully behind it, was the kind of provision that we were putting on in the community. It was different from what'd gone on - and still does go on - in the Branches. So instead of getting a tutor with fantastic knowledge, and even probably a good teacher (although we have subsequently revisited what we understand as a good teacher): introducing people to art, philosophy, we went out into the community and*

*responded to the needs of the community, because that was central to the WEA, and it would be something much more practical and down to earth... Although the notion that by offering aromatherapy courses, people will go on to develop their intellect has never, or very rarely happened.*

*I think we needed to be more centralised, it was the only way the WEA would survive as a whole, but they also needed to reign in some of these maverick districts. Perhaps maverick is the wrong word: I think the WEA was different, depending on where you were in any part of the country, but it was also the same: in that you ask me where else could I have done feminist studies - and apart from an extra mural department - I couldn't have done it anywhere else, at that time. There were tensions within that, because some of the staff, I mean probably some of the most maverick, were there thinking that the WEA must revisit the mission, and this was about working class education.*

*Even at the time I was appointed, most Tutor Organisers - up until I think the 70's - were subject specialists, and as we moved more towards developing the Community Programme, people became employed less for the subject specialism, and more for their range of skills and experience. So those good, solid, liberal, Tutor Organisers, who would spend a day a week in the library keeping up with their subject, just couldn't cope with this new environment of going out there, raising funds, and working with communities in unemployed centres. Some of the Tutor Organisers found that very difficult, and there are still the odd one or two about who also thought that, the WEA was about bringing an understanding of the arts, and literature, and politics, and philosophy, and economics to the working man and woman, but they refused to have a look at who was in their class: because who was in their class was not the working man or woman anymore, it was retired professionals. They were not facing up to the fact that the WEA had lost its original roots, which was about bringing education to the working classes.*

*In terms of how it's changed: it's very rare now for a Tutor Organiser to teach, because it's too expensive. In fact they, they are no longer called Tutor Organisers, and there is still some dispute about what they are called, but in ours we are called Organisers, and none of those people actually teaches - apart from if they're launching a new programme - or if they're tutoring tutors on a training programme. Some people I know - very radical people, are unhappy about that. They believe that it is essential to stay in connection to the students, and that it's important for the people to teach.*

*We're funded through the LSC, and before that through FEFC, and before that the DfES and DES, and so it's gone on somehow and we still come out at the other end, and we're getting bigger. Extraordinary really, how we've managed to do that, but it's not been without a struggle; and we've always managed to maintain the Liberal Programme being*

core funded. The Liberal Programme generally attracts significantly higher numbers than the Community Programme, because we're attracting, on the whole, people who are used to going to classes. Historically, the Community Programme grew out of external funding, and that's why we're always very vulnerable. I remember, I was one of the first people in the whole Association to write a bid to the ESF (European Social Fund) for £200,000 and I remember someone gave me a letter, 'ooh we've got all that money!' and the District Secretary said, 'remind me what it is for?' and people looking at me absolutely puzzled: 'well what do you plan to do with that?' From then on, we were bidding like mad and that's what kept the Community Programme alive. Then over the years, through the changes in funding, and the change in Government thinking and the whole Widening Participation agenda, funding became targeted much, much, more at those communities that we were targeting with the Community Programme. We should have begun to core fund, but the WEA has always been blessed, until now, with a funding regime that allowed us to run the Liberal Programme, but that's going to change. There's no doubt about that.

The defining characteristic of the WEA is the voluntary movement and voluntary governance, which determines the overall strategy and policy of the WEA and its Branches; and luckily we have moved to a position where 50% of our provision is with the Liberal Programme and 50% is out in the community. The WEA differs from other adult education providers, because we respond very quickly and very flexibly. The WEA has a history of pioneering things, but because we're small, we tend to get marginalised, so invariably you need to work in partnerships with the Government and its organisations. In the early days, we were not driven by agendas set by the Government, and neither were we driven by the whole thrust towards accreditation. I was never in favour of accrediting anything that moves. So, it was about responding to the needs of the learner - as expressed by the learner - offering a course, and actually saying to the students: what would you like to do next?

We're constrained more and more by the funding regime, and although we don't have many instances of people coming in through the Community Programme actually joining the whole Branch structure, that listening to community of students, about what they want, used to be central, but of course the Government isn't interested in listening to the voice of the learners, and neither are the Adult Learning Inspectorate. The Government sets the agenda: where the focus of the funding is, and so the WEA, in order to survive, speaks less with the voice of the learner, and so I have to say, in some respects what distinguishes us from other providers, has become blurred.

The whole funding model is a deficit model, it's identifying what's wrong with people, and so the focus of attention is about remedying the wrongs of the education system. I don't have an issue with that, other than it has shifted the focus away from education for

*its own sake - and the intrinsic value of education - to up skilling and I think the danger is that we end there. Adult education is life-long and it has a social context as well: and there's a significant number of people who come from working class backgrounds who are there for the sheer pleasure of learning. I just would like to think we still live in a society that says we should be providing these opportunities right across the board, because it's a positive thing to do: it's the cultural life of a community: it's part of a civilised society, and I fear that that element is being lost, and I think it's part of a general dumbing of society, and we're caught up in it. What we have is a society whose Skills for Life needs have, on the whole, been met, but they don't have any interests; they can't engage in challenging thought and discussion. I've painted a very bad picture there and I'm aware of that, and I hate it because it all sounds so...so pompous and middle class, especially coming from a woman, but I think the cultural life is diminishing.*

*What is happening to adult education is in some ways almost a reflection of society, but I have to say I don't think the Government meant that to happen. I think it's an unintended consequence of Government's concern about raising skills, in order to compete with the emerging economies. Being a realist, we have to do that - I don't have an issue with that - it's just that this particular focus has meant a shift of resources. Over the next couple of years NIACE has predicted that we will lose a million adult learners because of hiking up the fees; and the hiking up of fees is a reflection of the importance the Government and society places on what kind of learning is done for its own sake, in the interest of the individual, and that really runs counter to what I see central to the role of the WEA."*

## **Narrative Analysis – Pat**

### **The Transvaluation of Commitments in the Morphogenetic Elaboration of Structures**

Pat's early feminist commitments were clearly influential in shaping both her emerging social identity and agency, leading her to specialise in, and blaze a trail for, the education of working class women in the WEA. However, Pat's corporate environment was less than hospitable, and her attempts to address gender discrimination were, "not universally welcomed." As she recalled, "it was a battle." According to Pat, this was largely due to the fact that, many of her socialist colleagues considered class discrimination to be more worthy of tackling than sexual discrimination, and so to pursue separate feminist activity was thought a distraction; but there is also reason to believe that sexist attitudes might have been to blame. The Vicar's response to Pat - when she introduces the notion of

including some accredited provision to the work programme - is a good example of this, and although his attitude and actions may have been motivated by fear about change, the comments were *gender specific* and designed to disempower her on that basis,

*“When I came in, I remember they had this very big traditional programme, and in comes a very irate vicar and described me as this “young thing” (and I was in my mid-forties, so it is only in the WEA that I could be described as a “young thing”) who had all these radical ideas! The radical idea was that: I was trying to persuade them of the value of having some accredited provision on their programme, and they never heard the likes of it, so the vicar stormed out!”*

In spite of these barriers Pat continued with her efforts, but because of the widespread resistance to women's studies (and perhaps the WEA's reticence to modify its established programmes), it meant operating outside of the traditional WEA Branch structure and curricula activity. Thus, Pat's new work strand not only triggered a cultural change to the WEA, but a structural one also, as those Tutor Organisers - keen to see the WEA reunited with its true purpose - increasingly took on more of a community focus, and as a consequence became engaged in adult education activities that were supported by external funds and processes. Using Archer's familiar morphogenetic sequence, the effects of Pat's emergent corporate agency, and the elaboration it brought about, might be presented thus:

**Figure 4.3: The Elaboration of Agents and Structures in the Double Morphogenesis**

**Structure:** WEA offers General & Workplace Programme delivered via the Branches and workplace

T1 The elaborated agent (Pat) interprets the WEA mission by developing women's studies T2

**Interaction:** Pat pioneers & delivers women's studies & community education - funded externally

Bidding for funds generalises the role of T.O's & diversifies WEA's funding streams T3

**Structural elaboration:** Community Programme is mainstreamed (as is bidding for funds)

New work stream creates more female agents & a new community focus in WEA T4

(Adapted from Archer, 1995, p.76)

Of course, in transforming the culture and structure, Pat is herself transformed (double morphogenesis), and a new level of agential reflexivity emerges at this stage, which sees her continuously review and assess her original commitments, vis-à-vis the elaborated context. This is represented in the above figure when T4 becomes the new T1 position. Mature corporate agents review their new operational context to see if, a) it is possible/desirable to continue with their concerns in the altered environment, and b) if they can still do justice to them (Archer, 2000, p.298). As Archer points out, this kind of decision making process goes on in real life, "Because we change as persons and so do corporate agents [making] a series of recommitments ...inescapable" (2000, p.302).

Pat's narrative is a perfect illustration of this: as it shows her to have been constantly evaluating how best to continue the journey she has begun, mediated of course, by what was possible at that time. Pat, who describes herself as a 'realist', is acutely aware of internal and external forces that shape such possibilities, and how these can change over time. To explain: whilst it might have been difficult to introduce women's studies into the WEA, it was nevertheless *possible*. This was largely because of external factors, such as the second wave of feminism in the 70's, and the general shift in attitudes it effected at a societal level. However, still lacking the necessary internal financial support, Pat seeks and finds assistance from external sources, allowing her to continue the work - but shaping adult education in very specific ways – often taking the form of highly targeted, short-term projects. With the WEA reticent to promote this area of development, a growing number of Tutor Organisers take up this approach to enable women's studies and the Community Programme to flourish. In doing so, they inadvertently illustrate the viability of an alternative method of sustaining adult education, but one that, for the reasons I have already discussed, introduced new vulnerabilities into the WEA.

Over time, and alongside a changing educational climate that has become more individualistic and instrumental, the Community Programme finds itself in tune with other changes, which Pat identifies as, "funding... Government thinking...and the whole Widening Participation agenda," making the actions of the WEA 'modernists' look like a

sort of future prototype for the funding of adult education. My understanding from the narrative is that this was not Pat's intent, but it has turned out that way, because, over time, the distinct powers and properties of culture (society), structure (education and the state), and people (other agents), have further elaborated Pat's initial interpretation of the WEA mission, which was by way of a reminder: to raise the political consciousness of working class women. This reading is supported by the narrative, because she laments what has happened to the Community Programme,

*"What was sad to my mind, but I was fully behind it ... was the kind of provision that we were putting on in the community. It was different from what'd gone ... and still does go on in the Branches...So ...[instead of getting] ... a tutor with fantastic knowledge and even probably a good teacher... we responded to what the local community wanted, and it would be something much more practical and down to earth..."*

Even though Pat is saddened by the Community Programme's lack of academic robustness, she nevertheless believes it was the right way to go, because if they had left it up to the Branches, *"there would never have been the Community Programmes, Skills for Life or Women's Studies."* This gives us an important insight into - not only how Pat understands the historic mission of the WEA - but how she understands her role as a corporate agent, which in short is, "to bring education to the working classes." With this interpretation as the prime motivation for her agency, her continuous transvaluation of her other commitments, over time, are revealed as subordinate to the ultimate and overarching commitment to the WEA mission, and to the survival of the Association itself – agential behaviour which supports the argument detailed in chapter three.

The struggle to address the mission, that is: to attract working class people and raise their consciousness, is a familiar and well documented WEA theme – as are the tensions that accompany an agent's efforts to do so - which is effectively communicated in Pat's narrative, as she reflexively trades off the notion of a more robust curriculum offered via the Branches, in favour of the "down to earth" community courses that might actually engage people. As Pat recalls, the WEA Branch programmes at the time had lost touch with its target audience,

and had they looked more closely at who was in their classes, they would have realised that it was not the working man or woman, but retired professionals. Motivated by the genuine desire to reconnect the WEA with the 'right' sort of people, Pat advances generic, low level community education even though, as I have discussed more fully in chapter three, it contributed very little to creating activists or building the WEA's voluntary movement. Pat freely admits this too, adding that the potential for cross over between the Community Programme to something more academically rigorous, political or participatory, "never, or very rarely happened."

This all contrasts very sharply with her own experiences as a WEA student; something which she still, "values enormously" - and which crucially helped her to build, "her way of thinking" - spawning, "all sorts of...consciousness raising groups." Interestingly, these experiences, (and her early attempts as a new Tutor Organiser to raise the consciousness of working class women), were supported by a *loose* federal structure that allowed much local variance and experimentation: as Pat recalls, "the District Secretary preferred to let you get on with it, if you were getting on with it." So, bolstered by a, "radical governing body" and part of a District that was considered to be "pioneering," Pat did get on with it, enjoying the freedom to interpret the mission how she saw fit, and making the most of what the WEA's semi-autonomous structure had to offer.

However, despite having benefitted from such a structure as an emergent social actor, her concerns about other "maverick" Districts, elitist Branches, incompetent WEA management and outmoded, unprofessional, home working practices lead her to reassess her commitment to it. In this reappraisal, she shifts from defending discrete Districts to argue for integration and centralisation, even though she knows it will bring, "*the imposition of more regulation and control*" and restrict the autonomy of the voluntary membership.

Having supported these radical changes - which not only pave the way for more regulation and control - but arguably introduce the constraints of a more performative, instrumental,

model of education to the WEA, it seems strange that Pat should then mourn the diminishing voice of the learner. WEA activists might be less surprised by these developments: no doubt convinced by the structural facility of the 'old' WEA to both involve, and represent, learners in their experience of education. From their perspective perhaps, it is entirely to be expected that, as a direct consequence of organisational integration and centralisation, the processes of standardisation and professionalism have accelerated to erode the very practices and features that characterise a democratic, educational *movement*.

Although there are many areas of agreement between the two agents, Jim and Pat diverge spectacularly when it comes to the issue about how the WEA should move forward to secure its future: Jim's primary commitment to the WEA is *as a movement*, whereas Pat's commitment to the WEA is in whatever form it manages to survive. Again, Archer's realist theory of identity formation - and the primacy of experience - can help us understand why these unquestionably committed WEA agents should differ so radically on this crucial point. As I have illustrated, Jim's life experiences lead him to identify personally and professionally as a political activist; whereas Pat's experiences lead her to acquire a more porous social identity, allowing her early feminist commitments to become subordinate to her emerging and overarching concern for the survival of the WEA itself.

Pat, like the WEA itself, periodically revisits and updates her subordinate commitments, to assess whether, a) they continue to address the mission effectively in a society shaped by global technology and communications, and b) if they help or hinder the WEA to survive in a radically changing climate – even though this may threaten much of what the organisation has historically been about. Pat responds *as a realist* rather than a WEA activist: evaluating the complex dynamic of the broader, relational, environment that she and the WEA inhabit, and transvalues her personal commitments as *subordinate* in order to take advantage of a different set of possibilities, which exist as a result of elaborations that have emerged over time, *to ensure the continuation of the WEA* (figure 4.3).

It is clear from Pat's narrative that this process is neither straight forward, nor easy for the agent, because her reflections about how adult education has changed over time reveal somewhat uncomfortable insights about her own metamorphosis, leading her to reappraise her own trans-evaluation of adult education in the WEA, *and* re-evaluate her own personal identity, upon which she laments, "I've painted a very bad picture there and I'm aware of that and I hate it because it all sounds so...so pompous and middle class, especially coming from a woman..."

## Summary

In this chapter I take up two contrasting narratives which represent very different voices of the WEA, and using Archer's analytical framework, provide a detailed commentary of how each Tutor Organiser acquired their agency, what shape that agency took, and how it has been used by the agent and the WEA to address the organisational mission. The analysis reveals, in both cases, the primacy of individual experience and the centrality of personal commitments in the formation of agency. It also shows how, under the right emergent conditions, a person's agency can be further transformed through one of society's roles, to become powerful enough to bring about cultural and structural transformations.

Apart from illustrating how the identities of agents may change over time, the narrative analysis also reveals the changing nature of their agency over time, revealing the potential of emergent powers to affect an agent's *past* contributions, as well as those of the present. This phenomenon results in unintended elaborations to the working environment or provision and prompts mature agents to re-evaluate their commitments. However, as I have illustrated in this chapter, this evaluation can result in divergent responses from agents, who, depending upon whether they are able to transvalue their original commitments, either adapt to accommodate change, or else become estranged from their role and start to drift from the organisation.

## Chapter Six: Analysis of Common Emergent Themes

This chapter introduces, and is organised around, a set of common themes that emerged across the dataset when I interviewed the participants in 2006-7. Making use of all six personal perspectives, I will explore these issues which cover: individual and organisational autonomy; funding and quality assurance; the student voice and the state of the voluntary movement, to see how a changing educational climate - and more specifically the restructure of 2004 - has impacted upon WEA agents, and their capacity to exercise agency.

As an agent's powers and indeed their reflections, are dynamic, relational processes, rooted in the primacy of experience, the responses to these themes have necessarily been refracted through the very personal lens of the participants' own individual experience and commitments. Sometimes an agent reviews and changes these commitments to fit in with a modified environment, as I demonstrated with Pat's story in the previous chapter, whilst others like Jim, retain their original commitments as they appear to be more binding.

This ability, or willingness, to transvalue personal commitments, and refresh one's priorities, is ultimately what defines the participant responses to the themes identified here for further analysis. However, before I turn to these themes, I would like to re-introduce the four remaining members of the cohort with a little more biographical detail - as knowing more about them and what they value - might be a good indicator as to whether their commitments are enduring ones, or ones that the agent will be able to subordinate or transvalue.

**Sheila:** *"I'm from a traditional mining family...So of course I went through the miners' strike in 1984/85, and I guess that's when my education started. I left school at 15, no qualifications, with my life kind of mapped out - and I guess that consisted of working until I met the man of my life, then getting married and having children. In terms of my family, I guess there was never a real need for girls to be educated and follow some kind of career path, so I knew what my career was going to be...it was never questioned at the time.*

*Then along came the 1984/85 miners' strike and I was very much influenced by my family all being miners... and I guess I was very influenced by what I was seeing on the news. My husband was an activist who went out picketing, and the stories he was telling when he was coming back didn't add up to what the media were portraying at that particular time - of miners being the 'enemies within'. My three children were very young and so I had no income coming in. The only support we had was the support of some members of the community. The community was quite divided in terms of the mining industry, so I got involved with a local women's group. Some women went out into the soup kitchens. We didn't organise soup kitchens, but we did organise fund raising events and got much more involved in the kind of political side - and that's where my education started."*

**Nigel:** *"I was just a standard school – university – post graduate research assistant, but was more interested in doing applied work, organising work, rather than research. From a professional perspective, it was a chance to do some interesting work in shop steward education - in an area where the shop stewards' movement was quite strong and influential. I was interested in trade unions as a social movement, so it was more of a political or social interest."*

**Liz:** *"After I left school, having taken 'A' levels, I trained and worked as a nurse for several years. As a result of my experiences as a nurse, I decided to go to university and study philosophy as a mature student. I didn't think I had sufficient qualifications, so I went and studied for some more 'A' levels. Whilst working as a nanny, I then went to university in the mid-1970's and completed my degree in philosophy - fully intending to resume my career as a nurse. However, in the late 70's early 80's I became ill and was unable to carry on working full-time as a nurse. I began to do part-time teaching at night school, mainly on the kind of liberal adult education courses that the WEA offered. Then in 1988 the job of Tutor Organiser became available, I applied, and was happily successful, and have worked for the WEA ever since. I think I chose the WEA, partly, because it's an international organisation - and as a feminist and socialist that really appealed to me - because of its history of radicalism."*

**Rob:** *"I actually joined a WEA Branch when I was a student in the mid-1970's. I was becoming interested in education cause' I was enjoying my degree and becoming active politically. My first job was with the General Municipal Workers' Union; and I came into contact with the WEA again through joint work with the TUC ...Then I moved north and was involved with the Centre Against Unemployment: doing basically campaigning and political work. I was unemployed for a period of time, but helped to set up the no. 2 Branch in the area during the 1980's, which was overtly committed to what's been called social purpose education. I was Chair of this Branch for a number of years, and I also did some tutoring for the WEA and a local college. I then got a job working in the Centre Against*

*Unemployment, and eventually got a job with the WEA developing the Second Chance to Learn project, which was European funded. I then applied and got a Tutor Organiser's job, which is about 20 years ago. I suppose I felt excited, cause' the WEA seemed to offer what I see as being important in working class adult education: education not just for itself but education as a tool, as a means by which a better world could be won."*

From these excerpts, we can appreciate how the participants have invested themselves in their role as Tutor Organisers for the WEA, and we can also see areas of commonality between them, for example Jim and Sheila share a similar socio-economic background; whereas she and Pat share a commitment to raising the consciousness of working class women. However, in amongst such commonalities there are significant areas of difference, for example, the very different lived experiences that inform Sheila's and Pat's feminist perspectives; or the different kinds of experiences that lead Jim, Rob and Sheila to define themselves as activists – even though Sheila is in fact the only WEA grass roots activist from this cohort to be taken on as a WEA tutor.

There are of course many more instances of how the participants' experiences, values, and beliefs intersect across each other in this way, producing an interesting matrix of association that resists neat categorisation. This is because of the intensely biographical nature of their accounts, which is a narrative demonstration of the enviable levels of personal autonomy they enjoyed in their work as Tutor Organisers in the WEA. However, as we shall see this level of freedom gave rise to some individual and organisational tensions, which I shall explore now in the first of the commonly identified themes.

### **Individual and Organisational Autonomy**

Without exception, all the participants highlighted the importance of personal autonomy in their role as Tutor Organisers, giving them the license to interpret the organisational mission according to their own commitments. This freedom was supported by the WEA's original structure of semi-autonomous Branches and Districts, and resulted in what many of the participants consider to be WEA best practice and even part of its unique identity: promoting

and addressing a local agenda; encouraging diversity; taking risks; experimenting with provision in the community; being flexible and responding to the needs of its students.

Without this structure, and the liberty to define the WEA mission for themselves, agents may not have made the significant contributions that they have made, which to recap: enabled Pat to blaze the trail for women's studies in the WEA and develop the Community Programme, and Jim to pursue community development initiatives and political consciousness-raising.

The other participants have equally made their mark too: Sheila successfully engaged hard to reach working class women from coalfield communities, promoted liberal education and 'grew' her own tutors; Nigel made a significant contribution to trade union education, second chance education, community education, and more recently assisted the WEA to embed systems of performance management; Liz developed a community development approach in her location and also 'grew' her own tutors, whilst Rob actively contributed to WEA Branch development, developed and delivered political education, and seeded new areas of work with new partners.

From the narratives, it is clear that all the participants prized this freedom because it allowed them to make such contributions, and many recognised that they could have not worked in this way anywhere else. The reward for their efforts was substantial levels of personal and professional satisfaction: in being able to do some of the best, and most exciting teaching in their lives; in helping and seeing students develop; become active in their communities; and later go to university, or start a profession. In WEA circles this is often referred to as the 'special relationship' between tutors and students: with the educator showing just as much concern for the *person* as for their progress as *learners*. It is this personal connection that undoubtedly gives rise to the strong feelings of commitment tutors have toward their students, and the high levels of satisfaction they experience when they know they are changing lives, which in fact, is the shared motivation for all of the participants. However, it appears that the organisational structure supporting all these practices and outcomes had some serious weaknesses, as Nigel explains,

**Nigel:** *“If you look at the way the WEA used to be, you can see... you’ve got all those embedded habits of personal ownership at work, diversity and an absence of any proper management structure: an absence of clarity about budgets, targets and quality regime. Clearly people’s autonomy and ownership of their work’s important, but you really didn’t get any feedback on your work with the WEA back then, and there was no staff review system or any informal equivalent of that, so you wouldn’t really get a lot of advice or guidance about how to develop your work - it was case of sink or swim! Staff meetings, communications and that sort of thing were fairly limited, on the other hand, there have always been staff meetings of some sort, and there have always been friendship networks amongst staff, but the work was quite diverse and there weren’t a lot of common strands, and so although it gave marvellous opportunities to do interesting work, it meant your work was quite a specific and personal thing...So as an organisation it was shambolic to be honest, and not particularly coherent...”*

This echoes some of what Pat touches upon in her narrative, and receives further support from Liz too, who pin-points some of the negative consequences that such unfettered autonomy engendered in the WEA,

**Liz:** *“There were difficulties in the past, completely maverick regions who were not complying with the more federal model...they not only weren’t applying the structures of that, but were actually not behaving in a way that was acceptable. One region decided to start paying people completely different things - that weren’t on any nationally agreed pay scale - and there had also been gross mismanagement in some regions, which, because of the nature of the WEA, had an impact on the rest of the organisation.”*

In the absence of an overarching, functional, regulatory framework, such levels of autonomy had an individual and an organisational cost: a fact that became painfully apparent when the WEA senior management team was found to have seriously mismanaged finances and Government contracts in the 90's. It is possible, that had these events happened at a time other than when the education sector was being marketised, the WEA might have been left to address these issues internally - and hold onto a reasonable level of autonomy - ordinarily expected of an independent organisation. However, they occurred at a time when the discourses of managerialism and quality

dominated education, effectively communicating to the WEA's principal funder and its competitors, that the organisation lacked two increasingly important values: accountability and professionalism. The participants' response to these issues is divided, but they all agree that the Association had got itself into a mess, and it is against this backdrop that the WEA – weakened by a succession of crises - develops the discourse of survival that drives the controversial internal restructure of the early 90's, which ultimately results in the WEA losing their autonomy.

This reorganisation integrated the loose federation of the WEA into a single Association, centralising power and decision-making, and addressing the issues of accountability and professionalism in a way that brought the WEA in line with Government policy and the goals of its quangoes. As a consequence, from the 90's (under the FEFC) up until the introduction of the LSC in the Noughties, tutors found their practices increasingly constrained, and the WEA's organisational objectives beginning to change,

**Sheila:** *“The LSC priorities have affected the WEA mission because, what we’ve now got to do is set up courses which fit into a particular remit: we’ve got to have 10 bums on seats, and we’ve got to show a clear progression route from those courses; whereas the model we’re talking about is one about a process, which can take time. What I’m interested in, is the impact on local communities and a course doesn’t have an impact on communities. You need to gather folk together to say: what are the issues affecting our community and what can we do about it? And only by educating local people, can they bring about changes, it’s not about us bringing about changes - it’s about local communities bringing about changes, and a sense of ownership, and a course doesn’t give people a sense of ownership. So the priorities are shifting us away from what I feel WEA should be about.”*

Whilst the other participants might broadly agree with much of what Sheila says, there appears to be a definite divide in the cohort between those who view the impact of those changes as the death knell to the voluntary movement - and by the same token the WEA - and those who accept these developments because they feel they have to, but also

because they believe that modernising and professionalising the WEA might actually benefit the Association. Interestingly, these positions seem to depend upon tutor identities, and whether they see themselves as *WEA activists working for a movement* with a responsibility to local people, or whether they see themselves as *professionals with a responsibility to ensure the continuation of the organisation*. Presented as the only viable option, the WEA takes up the Government's professionalisation agenda and introduces a framework of accountability that is designed to support a service, rather than a movement (Fieldhouse, 1996, p.188). This, as Sheila points out, limits the opportunity for Tutor Organisers to fulfil their role, and engage working class people in the WEA's unique form of education – a theme that I will return to, when I explore the impact of change on the voluntary movement.

However, as I have highlighted elsewhere, this is not the first time Government policy has influenced the work and direction of the WEA, but it is the first time that the state has directly interfered in processes that are usually left for independent organisations to determine: such as class size, the curriculum, quality assurance and human resource issues. This kind of Government interference is highly significant because, in targeting the practices of teaching and learning, independent organisations were not only forced to effectively align their practices to the objectives of the state, but restructure in order to do so. Archer's theory of morphogenesis - and specifically structural elaboration - is insightful here, showing how, over time, such structural elaborations bed in, to bring about a longer lasting, cultural, morphogenesis (figure 4.2), providing a radically different kind of working environment for new agents joining the organisation. In the WEA's case, the structural elaboration of the early 90's aligning it to positivist notions of education, and the escalation of these trends under New Labour, might well mean that a new breed of WEA agent emerges,

**Rob:** *"Newer Organisers...don't come with that particular political baggage, and it's possible that as a result we're going to witness a sort of watering down of our political agenda...They might not necessarily see the relevance of the purpose of our type of education. All education is about politics, it is about*

*politics with a small 'p' within the curriculum; sometimes it's about politics with a big 'P', but it's certainly about history. You've got to have a historical perspective and to engage. It is about understanding the world and seeking to make the world a better place...and that's what the WEA's about."*

The internal restructure of the 90's might therefore be considered a watershed in WEA history where, in response to a perceived threat, the Association introduces positivist and performative forces which, not only compromise its agents by curbing their individual autonomy, but also taint the Association's claims to independence: eroding its unique identity as a voluntary provider of socially purposeful adult education. Integration also arguably paved the way for the more radical restructure of 2004 and the regionalisation of the WEA, which swept away its original structure - and with it the quintessential role of Tutor Organiser - replacing it with something more suited to the WEA's contractual obligations and new geographical set up: The Regional Educational Manager.

This radical alteration to the role has not been universally welcomed by Tutor Organisers, and this is indeed reflected in the cohort of this study: identifiable by the degree to which the participants dispute their new title. Interestingly, the divide amongst participants, again, appears to be tied up with whether they see themselves as educational 'professionals' with more flexible concerns, or whether they consider themselves as 'activists' with more enduring ideological commitments. The agent-as-activist, who cannot align themselves - either personally or professionally - with emerging priorities, will undoubtedly find the elaborated context of work much more challenging than the agent-as-professional, because it directly conflicts with the very essence of *who they are as people*.

In the context of this research, this means that, whilst all the participants were able to identify a common set of issues that have affected the Tutor Organiser role and the WEA, and agree about the impact these issues have had, their positionality about such issues is very different, as these narrative excerpts reveal,

**Rob:** *“I suppose the big change for me is that I do an awful lot of management now. I’m a very unimportant Regional Manager, which means I’m responsible for all our regional work, and with my colleague, we manage all the staff. I’m also responsible for the workplace learning, the Trade Union engagement work, and the training and development in the region. Now some of that - don’t get me wrong - I quite enjoy, but there’s quite a lot of it that I find really painful, but I have to do it, it’s part of the brief. What I really like doing is organising stuff, developing stuff, working with people, teaching, that’s what I like. It has changed dramatically, because I still see myself as a Tutor Organiser, but other people these days classify [us] as Organisers, so the ‘Tutor’ bit’s been taken out – although, quite a lot of those who’ve been around continue, correctly, to call themselves Tutor Organisers.”*

**Nigel:** *“We call organisers ‘Programme Area Managers’ here... and I think they’re energetic, outgoing, and they’re addressing a different sort of specialist educational disadvantage agenda now, than it was. I feel they’ve got a decent balance between being managers: in the sense of managing part-time staff, being clear about the budget they’ve got, and all of those sort of things which, really, the organisation needs. We’ve got partnerships, so people know this is more of a management role, but at the same time they’ve sort of built the organisation up in important ways. Getting nearer to students: organisers probably feel, on balance, less positive about the way things have changed, cause’ looking at it from their point of view their crucial relationship is with the students, and they feel that their relationship with the students is over intruded upon by the WEA, with different sort of regimes around audit trails, and quality, and so forth. Although they have certain benefits, they would feel that the quality of their work had probably declined. I’m pretty sure that would be a fairly sort of common view, and I can sympathise with that...”*

Regardless of their reflective positions, all six agree that a radical change has taken place to the role of Tutor Organiser: where they were once at the very heart of the WEA - and critical to the delivery of its special mission - they are now on the periphery,

**Liz:** *“Once they were thought as being of some importance, whereas I don’t think we are now. I mean for example, the management meeting that’s happening next door, there’s no Tutor Organisers there, there’s somebody from the admin’ staff and somebody from the finance staff, but no Tutor Organisers, you know? Which is not untypical. Quite often within this region,*

*there's changes made into various procedures, or various mechanisms without there being any discussion with Tutor Organisers, who are after all, the people who organise and arrange them, and make sure that the programme happens."*

With high levels of individual and organisational autonomy traded off for the more bureaucratic concerns of performance management, there has been a notable, and unsurprising, rise in the functions of finance and monitoring, which brings me onto the next duo of commonly identified themes.

## **Funding and Quality Assurance**

As well as addressing some important organisational weaknesses, the WEA restructure of the 90's aligned some of its operations so that it could better deliver on the Government's educational policy, and in 2004 further reorganised to suit the structural framework and the cultural ethic of New Labour's quangoes: the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI). Working in unison, these functions of funding and inspection - that had already successfully restructured the compulsory and Further Education sectors - were now impacting on the WEA. Reliant on state funds, the WEA could not circumvent the strict criteria used to release those funds, and nor could they escape the positivist, quality assurance processes that managed their use: effectively changing the nature of what the WEA offered, to whom, and how. As we already know from some of the participants, this meant that Tutor Organisers were now obliged to find minimum numbers to attend a course of learning – a radical departure for an organisation whose emphasis, traditionally, has been on informal engagement and participation,

**Rob:** *"The reality is, people come to learning in very different ways and ... they come to learning because [we] offer them an opportunity that's not intimidating, that's friendly, that actually values their experience, values what they've got to offer, says to them you have got intelligence, you have got things that you can contribute to. So it's very different to their whole experience of education, and it might be informal, it might be short - you know all these things actually get people going."*

As we know from Jim's narrative, LSC funding did not allow any time for the informal, relationship building that was necessary for people who, as a result of their poor experiences of compulsory education, lacked the confidence to sign up for the formality of a class. One of the effects of the funding regime therefore, was to effectively formalise informal processes by cutting out the engagement role of the Tutor Organiser, which in Jim's case, took him away from what he loved doing best: meeting people and organising the kinds of successful community activities he had done in the past. Similarly, Sheila was unable to hold coffee mornings, run residentials, or hold informal groups for women to have a go at designing and delivering their own learning,

**Sheila:** *“The funding doesn’t allow us to engage in that kind of process - unless we’re bringing in external funding - which we’ve recently just done, to test out engagement models ...and... I got quite excited about it cause’ I thought: the WEA’s not been doing this for a long time. What we do now is offer courses. So I jumped in and said, ‘Can we have that money?’ and you know, we did manage to appoint a development worker, and this approach has proved successful time and time again. There’s been enough written about it actually, and we know now what works...But that’s my experience - equally it’s the experience of lots of other adult education theorists, you know... [like when] Jane Thompson had written a piece around, ‘Is there anyone out there who’s still engaged in good adult education?’”*

Engaging in *good* adult education, clearly refers to the tradition of andragogy in the 70's, where educators such as Jane Thompson, or Tom Lovett, promoted a very different sort of praxis: one that was not uniform, and did not have the, 'neat beginnings and endings' that often characterise learning today. As I have argued throughout, this type of 'good' adult education was not about recruiting adult learners to courses, especially in the case of disadvantaged and vulnerable adults, but *was* about engaging with people informally, and finding out from them what sort of knowledge would be really useful, to transform their lives. The narrative data, however, suggests that not all WEA Tutor Organisers operate within this tradition - exposing a historical and on-going tension within the WEA about the nature of its adult curricula - with some believing that the WEA was driven too much by participation, and not enough by achievement and progression,

**Nigel:** *“In a sense there was an over participation rather than achievement culture, and people would say that the WEA is being accessible, and doesn’t put you under any pressure - which is fine, but you also need a push to get the best out of people...”*

The problem was that, at a time when the sector was preparing for the launch of a National Qualifications Framework, achievement and progression almost exclusively came to mean the achievement and progression *on accredited courses with qualifications*. This proved challenging for the WEA for a number of reasons: firstly, because the organisation predominantly offered unaccredited provision, and secondly, because the nature of that provision was predicated on a thoroughly different philosophy; and formalising the WEA educational experience in this way, threatened to undermine what their education was really all about,

**Rob:** *“The whole agenda now is very focussed on the individual and that is dangerous, because, of course, it takes away from the whole notion of the collective aspects of our type of education. That again is Government policy: where everything’s built round individual learning plans, a sort of individualisation of education, I suppose.”*

The narrow definition of 'progression' also proved to be a sticking point for the WEA, as the ways in which their students often progressed, for example by becoming a school governor or setting up a local playgroup, lay outside of the methodology used by Government quangoes, and could therefore not be counted. A further problem was the way funds were weighted, giving rise to some peculiar anomalies as Liz describes here,

**Liz:** *“One of the idiocies this year is that ICT, which I think for most men between 19 and 40 is their return-to-learn subject of choice, is less well funded than craft courses - where I can demonstrate people making paper flowers - which I think is absolutely bonkers! Several of my colleagues have found a way of integrating craft into ICT in a way that isn’t too bad this term, because we can actually say this is festive and you can make your Christmas cards, but it’s not really a sustainable option!”*

Besides being unsustainable, the practice of embedding more lucrative kinds of learning into other less well supported curriculum areas is disingenuous - and could make the WEA unpopular with their students - but as Liz points out in her narrative, "that's the way the funding has been structured." This funding structure (developed directly from the marketisation of education in the early 90's), definitively changed the relationship between the state-as-funder and providers, but it also changed the orientation of the adult education curriculum itself: skewing it to reflect Government priorities, so that providers would be best placed to win essential contracts. The binding nature of these contracts had a number of divisive effects on adult education: forcing providers to further promote a false dichotomy between skills and knowledge, that categorised learning as either 'functional' or 'recreational' - which according to Sheila - "wasn't going to inspire women in [her] communities to get involved."

The strict terms of the funding regime affected all organisations in receipt of state funds, and over time, blurred the distinctions that once existed between them, as they all geared up to deliver the same educational priorities of the state,

**Rob:** *"We're doing much more basic skills than we used to do, no doubt about that and ... it's not unimportant - I don't think anyone would deny the importance of offering people those possibilities - the issue is how you do that; and the other issue is the nature of the curriculum, so that's an area for dialogue. The sorts of things that we're involved in are being restricted because there's a mantra of skills, skills, skills... everything is about skills, and in that environment you see organisations, including the WEA, becoming trapped by that."*

This of course presents a huge problem for an organisation that is supposed to be demand led, and committed to providing a diversity of non-vocational and emancipatory, educational opportunities to those most in need. As Liz disclosed, there are tutors who try to avoid the narrow instrumentalism of Government policy by subverting the funding mechanism, but it is questionable whether such localised attempts have any real chance of turning into something more considerable. This is because organisations can neither

escape the functions of the LSC and the Adult Learning Inspectorate, nor break the ideological threads that bind them and which effectively control *what* kind of adult education is delivered, to *whom*, and *how*.

As I explained in chapter two, the extensive scope and authority of the inspectorate has the power to not only scrutinise every aspect of adult education delivery, but enforce provider compliance: which means they can define teaching and learning practices, shape the systems which support those definitions of professional praxis, and, if necessary, restructure organisations to comply with its educational assumptions. However, before I look at the impact of the inspectorate's approach on the WEA (as seen through the personal lens of the Tutor Organisers); it is useful to first consider the positionality of ALI - to better understand if it supports a broad or 'thin' interpretation of adult education praxis.

The Chief Inspector gives a clear orientation in his report of 2004/5 when he introduced a 'new methodology' which had emerged from a climate of, "Government spending and efficiency reviews, [and] streamlining inspections," stating that the focus would be on, "Links with employers, employment outcomes [and] the skills agenda" (ALI, 2004-2005, p.3). This communicated an approach that would almost certainly make use of standardised procedures to suit its new 'streamlined' methodology, but as I have already argued, whilst its uniform metric may give the illusion of efficiency, the heavy bureaucracy that supports such frameworks rarely makes them so.

Despite having centralised some of its operations in the 90's, and better aligned itself to provide evidence for its highly targeted Government contracts, the WEA still favoured *qualitative* rather than quantitative quality assurance methods, which - coupled with its continuing organisational commitment to the mission - lent the Association thoroughly different, and divergent, educational priorities to those of ALI. With this sort of mismatch, state inspections were always going to be challenging for the WEA, but especially so for those Tutor Organisers who considered the new methodology to be wholly unsuited to evaluate the WEA's special kind of adult education. Indeed, as we have already heard

from Sheila, many of the outcomes that the WEA would offer up, were disregarded by ALI because of its narrow focus on employability, and so the valuable outcomes that included volunteering, or becoming community leaders, or indeed WEA lay tutors, just didn't count.

Yet, even if the Inspectorate had widened its focus to be more inclusive, it is doubtful whether the data would have satisfied the linear and incremental expectations of individual student development, embedded within its positivist assumptions.

Interestingly, this trajectory of learner development is not even an experience that the cohort can relate to - let alone their disadvantaged students - whose life circumstances tend not to predispose them to the administrative rigour of formal learning. Unable to accommodate the messiness of real life, formal, positivist, frameworks often categorise these students as 'non-learners' or 'not class ready' but, ironically, it is this area of practice that has highlighted the advantages of an alternative adult pedagogy.

However, it is clear that positivist concepts of education only value the informal approach for its ability to increase the potential student body: by assisting individuals to become 'class ready'. From this perspective, one might see the introduction of RARPA as a measure for quantitative quality assurance frameworks to effectively make sense of, and evidence, the informal educational experience in the terms it understands and values,

**Jim:** *"It's true we have RARPA, a comprehensive process for every course, providing feedback and checks for the learning journey; and we have a framework which inspects the quality of teaching in the WEA, but I don't think these things have improved the WEA. The only difference now is that we can evidence quality by a bit of paper and ticking boxes...It's now easier to tick, therefore, in this kind of accounting society that we've got, what do they call it, bean counting? You can weigh in can't you, yet human beings are not like that, but the system says they are..."*

Whether RARPA is used or not, it is apparent that ALI has a prescriptive concept of what quality learning looks like: setting out the student journey as distinct and incremental parts, involving an initial assessment; goal setting; a formal course of learning; the achievement of set learning goals; the accreditation of the learning process and ultimately the conferment of a qualification. Equally, ALI has a notion of what quality teaching looks like, and it is here that the improvement agenda has had the greatest impact on the inclusive and democratic practices of the voluntary movement, and more specifically, on the demise of that other quintessential WEA role: the lay tutor,

**Liz:** *“One of the best tutors I’ve ever worked with... was a train driver - an autodidact, who was very enthusiastic about classical music and taught the best music appreciation courses anybody could ever wish to attend. He would be excluded from teaching at the WEA now, because he doesn’t have teaching qualifications... I think that any quality assurance system that subordinates the coherence of the system to the quality it is supposed to ensure, is fatally flawed. In defence of the WEA I don’t think that flaw can be laid at our door. I mean that’s actually to do with the Department of Education and Skills and maybe their view of qualifications.”*

The advancement of Qualified Teacher Status, driven by professionalisation and New Managerialism in education, will no doubt transform the WEA's informal and holistic approach, but it will also drive up the overall cost of adult learning and exacerbate the current fees crisis. This was another concern identified by the cohort,

**Rob:** *“We are being polarised between a section of the working class accessing the WEA: the disadvantaged - the bottom 10 per cent [who] can get fee remission, and ...the rich ...at the top - I don’t know maybe the top 20 per cent, who are sufficiently well off and able to pay quite high fees. Then you’ve got 70 per cent of normal men and women - many whom would still see themselves as working class - who are not well off, but they’re into learning, and they are going to be the people who are currently the most likely to miss out...”*

Another effect of professionalising the WEA has been to estrange the Tutor Organiser from teaching, because the improvement agenda shifts them from teaching students (as it becomes too expensive), to monitoring and managing quality assurance issues. This has provoked a passionate response from many in the cohort - and the wider community of Tutor Organisers - not just because the new orientation has taken them away from what they like doing best, but because they believe the activity of tutoring is a vital link in ensuring quality,

"When will Tutor Organisers get closer to the curricula and the teaching, and justify the first part of their title? Tutor Organisers should, I feel, have some professional areas of expertise in order to make a real contribution to the quality of teaching" (WEA NEWS, Jan – March 2006, p.5).

From this perspective, assuring quality is part of an on-going internal communication between the tutor and the student, rather than a series of formal snapshots taken periodically by external assessors. The conceptual gulf between these two approaches – that is to say between the WEA and ALI - is evident when Sheila, in defence of the Association's organic approach, inadvertently reveals the impact of the highly structured regime that now informs her work as a Regional Educational Manager,

**Sheila:** *"We constantly need to learn the lessons again from students as well, and the only quality measures we put in have got to be part of that on-going dialogue with tutors and with students. We get tutors together on different curriculum areas; I mean we've got another curriculum conference coming up, and part of that process is looking at how we identify learners' starting points. The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) might say it's about an initial assessment, but for me it's much more about what's appropriate for the tutor and our students, so we want tutors to start to identify learner starting points and look at how they evidence that. In some ways we're using the same kind of markers, but perhaps we're taking a very different approach, in terms of how we engage with that process. ALI has a much more of a linear approach."*

ALI's approach is not only linear, but proscribed, ensuring that (in line with the new methodology), teaching professionals periodically seek formal feedback from their students,

at various points in their learning journey. This systematic approach has changed the nature of student feedback, and the student voice – once central to informing the WEA about 'what works' - has become quieter, as real opportunities to influence the educational agenda have diminished. Cast in this passive role, student contributions about quality in education have tended not to focus on teaching and learning, but for the most part on pragmatic issues, such as improved course information, more resources, and more venues with better car parking facilities. With regard to the Inspectorate's priorities, student feedback does not seem to suggest that there is any support for embedding more literacy and numeracy into the WEA curriculum, or ensuring the Association has a corporate vision, or establishing better scrutiny of its quality assurance functions (WEA Inspection Report, 2004, p.27).

Overall, this new approach to quality assurance has divided opinion within the cohort, because despite being able to single out some tangible benefits, for example it is now easier to roll-out best practice from curriculum groups across the WEA, exploit greater economies of scale in resourcing, and offer a more coherent accredited programme the majority feel that it has ultimately weakened the voluntary movement. Again, where the participants stand on this issue depends on what degree they consider themselves to be a WEA *realist* or WEA *activist*.

Generally speaking, the 'realists' who respond to the discourse of survival (Pat and Nigel), are the most accommodating, whereas the 'activists' (Jim, Sheila and Liz) are least accepting of the trade-offs made in recent times. Rob – an 'activist' too I would suggest, seems caught somewhere in between: recognising that whilst many of the changes have strengthened the WEA as an educational provider, they have by the same token weakened the WEA as a movement,

**Rob:** *“There’s been this massive professionalisation of the whole sector...driven forward with a vengeance by LSC and the DfES, and obviously we’re in there, and that’s been a double edged sword. I’m personally naturally wary about professionalisation. I think it was George Bernard Shaw who said, ‘all professions are a conspiracy against the laity.’ I rather like that, anyway,*

*here I am sitting as a professional, so called, but I think we have to be a bit self-critical and sceptical about the whole notion of professionalism. That said, we have to function, we have to be good don't we? So, we have to have structures and systems in place that ensure that, as far as it's humanly possible, our staff are really good at what they're doing."*

Although Rob is talking specifically about quality standards here, it does beg the question: what should WEA staff be really good at doing? For the former Tutor Organisers who took part in this study, the answer goes beyond teaching: it means putting the learners' needs before policy objectives, which, for the reasons I have presented, has become increasingly difficult to do. This has had a serious impact on the role of the student in the WEA, curtailing their ability to directly influence their learning, or become involved in the wider movement, as I have argued. These two aspects, which up until now have been a fundamental part of the WEA's practices and identity, are clearly under threat as the student voice becomes fainter, and the voluntary movement weakened by a serious lack of active members. Highlighted as a concern by the cohort, the WEA's students and the voluntary movement form the last of the commonly identified themes that conclude this chapter.

## **WEA Students and the Voluntary Movement**

Without question, the ideological restructuring of education has had the greatest impact on the adult learner, which has changed the *what*, *how* and *why* of adult education. Nowhere are these changes more evident than in the WEA, where the centrality of the student has been paramount, both in representing the voice of the learner, and involving adult learners in an empowering educational experience that is inextricably part of a wider movement. Up until the Second World War, Branch activity demonstrated a clear connection between the *what*, *how* and *why* of WEA education, with Tutor Organisers working hard with their students to build up local Branches which, in just a few years, resulted in the rapid growth of the WEA into a national movement. The role of the 'special relationship' between the tutor and student was crucial in this, but as I have shown, developments in WEA provision – particularly the Workplace and Community Programmes - weakened this connection by

taking activity outside of the Branch structure, leaving both tutors and students cut off from the voluntary movement, and sometimes even unaware of the historic purpose of the WEA's education,

**Rob:** *“The organisation was based on a lay movement, (which it still is, albeit weak), and there is an issue about what is the relationship between a tutor and a class, and the students and the voluntary movement? What is the methodology of the WEA? What is the intention of a WEA class? ...[S]ome of the WEA practice remains in the best tradition, in other words: the relationship is one of equality, it's one where the tutor has something to offer, but so do the students – ‘we're all teachers’, ‘we're all learners’, that sort of philosophy. It's one of democratic practice, and negotiating a curriculum, and going off in one little tangent, when that's appropriate.”*

As Rob identifies, the very purpose and praxis of WEA education was embedded within the 'special relationship' itself, through which 'hard to reach' adult learners were successfully recruited and encouraged to participate, but more importantly - and critically for an educational movement - inspired to act, or in Archer's terms: become agents. This special relationship seems, to me, to have been defined by the presence of three specific elements: 1) an informal methodology; 2) a commitment to egalitarian relationships, and 3) the belief that education should serve the interests of participative democracy. Through this relationship, the adult learner has had a strong voice and an active role in shaping their education, as well as the possibility of developing their agency further, so they can shape a much bigger educational agenda. This relationship reflects perfectly the aims and objectives of the WEA's mission which, although it has changed over the years, still retains some of its original commitments,

**Rob:** *“The ... aims and objects of the WEA still talk about the collective, and recognises the importance of working with the most disadvantaged section of the community; recognises the importance of getting people out of poverty; recognises the importance of lifelong learning and education for all, so it still has built into its constitutional framework some fairly radical thinking. There are examples in the WEA of where that is actually being practiced, but there remains the problem about the link between that, and how we fund that work.”*

As I suggested earlier in this thesis, it is questionable whether the state will knowingly fund the structures that support this kind of activism, and it is evident in how the Government manages its highly targeted funds, that it will not support the functions necessary for the WEA to strengthen its own voluntary movement. Moreover, as concerns about the voluntary movement were voiced as early as the 50's, the fault cannot lie entirely with current policy, but perhaps with the WEA itself,

**Liz:** *“One of the big real failings of the national WEA is that we haven't harnessed the voluntary participation of most of the people who've gone on community based courses... The WEA needs to find ways to involve the learners who come on those courses in our voluntary structures, which is occasionally rhetorically affirmed as a priority, but hasn't been seriously undertaken in any co-ordinated way that I've known of, or witnessed.”*

To be fair, the present educational discourse does play its part in the WEA's struggle, as it affects the Association's ability to deliver 'really useful knowledge' and realise its historic organisational mission. However, despite these challenges, Nigel believes there are more possibilities to work within the current agenda than people think, and "fine possibilities" exist to do work around, "social inclusion, poverty [and] development." Yet, as Jim pointed out in his narrative, although this work might be worthwhile - it will not create activists - who after all are the essential lifeblood of a movement, leaving only one *real* question for the WEA to resolve: should the WEA be a general adult educational service or an educational movement?

Despite its claims, the WEA sometimes appears to function more like a publicly funded educational service, rather than a movement, a criticism that has been levelled at the Association before. Yet the commitment to the 'special relationship' - and to the WEA mission, which binds it to practicing democracy in education, as well as educating for democracy - is still going strong, as is evident in the cohort's responses here,

**Sheila:** *“The WEA is a movement and it should remain a movement. I think we should be outside of educational orthodoxy and encouraging people to have a voice, at all different levels so we can make challenges locally...The role of education ... has got to be about learning for learning’s sake... It’s also got to be a bit about enriching people’s lives, about being tolerant of lots of other kinds of cultures and ways of life. Education has got to be a political education: political in terms of the health service that’s provided at a local level, political in terms of what schooling’s provided at a local level and the impact that that has on people.”*

**Nigel:** *“When you boil the mission down, you’re looking at positive adult education experience for people who have not achieved much, or had negative experiences first time around, and you’re looking at education that’s reasonably sort of student driven, participating, negotiating, and you’re looking at contextualising some of these links and experiences, working with students and potential students in a flexible way, round their interests and needs, as they see them... That’s what we do well, that is the evidence, and the experience of the WEA.”*

**Liz:** *“I chose the WEA, probably most of all, because of its commitment to the learners ...I think one of the things that is most impressive about my colleagues, at every level of the organisation, in every role, is their commitment to the learners... and everybody I know works very hard...because of the extent to which they know, and identify with, the people we have as learners... [who] tend to be ... disadvantaged and excluded people.”*

**Rob:** *“The two things that are the most important about the WEA, and are the basis of why we’re different to any other provider, is the voluntary movement and the fundamental importance of liberal education with a social purpose. They’re important because we are the only organisation that is based on a democratic structure, and so democracy, both in terms of our structure, but also in terms of our practices, are a fundamental principle of what the WEA’s about.”*

**Pat:** *“Another important feature of the WEA is the ability to respond ... to the needs of the learner, as expressed by the learner, offering a course, and actually saying to the students: what would you like to do next? The other defining characteristic of the WEA is the voluntary movement and voluntary governance, [that] determines the overall strategy and policy of the WEA.”*

**Jim:** *“Adult learning is not about individuals tekkin’ courses, it’s about collective, transformative experiences and this kind of learning has a ripple effect on the rest of the community. The group is the gaffer in a course. Education should be liberationist not oppressive, as the state school system is. It shouldn’t be based on a deficit model as Skills for Life is, it should be based on people being used as living resources, who are able to contribute positively to their community. Transformative, collective learning is multi-national in its roots and continues throughout the course of a life, it doesn’t finish.”*

The very challenging educational climate has, understandably, led a couple of the participants in the cohort to take a bleak view of the movement's future, believing it will not survive. A couple of others take a more pragmatic view, and although they would not choose for the WEA to operate in this way, insist that there are workable options under the current regime. Rob, straddling the middle position, manages an optimistic view reasoning that, over the longer term, things will undoubtedly change, and give rise to fresh opportunities for the WEA to take advantage of,

**Rob:** *“We still do base ourselves on a voluntary movement and that is a fundamental and unique part of the WEA, but the challenge for us now is how we can rebuild that, re-invigorate it. That’s achievable, but it’s hard and the WEA is committed to doing that. Like all voluntary movements, they go up and down and it’s not peculiar to the WEA, but we have a particular challenge on that front. It’s like the trade union movement’s weak, and it’s had to re-look at how it’s structured, and move away from its old way of working, [to find] new ways of communicating, so we need to do all those things.”*

Despite their differing positionality, all the former Tutor Organisers were united in their views about what was both distinctive and valuable about the WEA, leading to the conclusion that there still exists a firm idea of what the WEA identity is. The participants

also agreed that the current constraints of education policy directly threatened this, and expressed the desire for the WEA to address this by regaining its lost autonomy,

**Nigel:** *“WEA ... funding is dependent on the LSC, which is a big issue for the WEA. I think it’s very important the WEA regions loosen that dependence... You know we could raise more fees, but that limits your student body - but we are committed to getting much more student project type income around different agendas - other than the skills agenda.”*

As I have illustrated throughout this thesis, the contestable nature of adult education means that the WEA will have to fight to regain what it feels it has lost, and be more aggressive perhaps in deploying one of its oldest functions: campaigning. Educational territory once thought of as secure in the 70's, such as the right to universal, comprehensive, education and the right to access socially purposeful adult education throughout the life course, is no longer secure - and is in fact disappearing - prompting some former Tutor Organisers to reassess (or transvalue) their original commitments,

**Rob:** *“For most of my adult life I’ve argued that the really important education is collective, social purpose education, and that the notion of education for education’s sake is of secondary importance - we’ll deal with that when we’ve won a new world - and then anybody can have it. I’ve increasingly changed my view on that. I remain as committed as ever to social purpose education, but I’ve become angry about the fact that people are now being denied the opportunity of learning for learning’s sake. If someone wants to just go read books and discuss them, and that’s all they want to do, and that makes life marginally more interesting, then that’s great and... if it doesn’t lead to a job or to a degree in literature, I mean, frankly, who bloody cares! Well obviously the Government does bloody care, but I don’t, and I don’t think progressives or educators should care, cause’ that in, and of, itself is fantastic. I would argue that the state has a responsibility to subsidise adult learning, and lifelong learning, to make it easier for people who want to go, because it makes life better for them.”*

## Summary

In this chapter I take a different approach to the data, and drawing on the remaining four narratives, provide critical commentary to a set of commonly identified themes that emerged across the entire dataset. In doing so, I discern a divide in the cohort: between those who perceive themselves as 'realists' and those who see themselves as 'activists'. These perspectives inform their positionality on the themes highlighted, and on the reorganisations of the WEA itself. Nevertheless, despite these different positions, the participants are remarkably congruent when it comes to identifying the key impact of ideological restructuring on the WEA, revealing a loss of organisational autonomy, as well as the historic roles of the WEA Tutor Organiser and lay tutor.

Their reflections also give much insight into the workings of the funding mechanism, and how - linked to the quality assurance function - it is impossible for organisations to subvert. The effect of these changes, the participants agree, has skewed the nature of adult learning, and left little space for a flexible and broad, educational agenda that is geared to meeting the real needs of learners. United in their concern for the diminishing voice of the learner; student participation in learning; as well as participation in the wider movement of the WEA, the cohort come to the unanimous conclusion that the only way to meaningfully address these issues is for the WEA to regain its lost autonomy.

## Chapter Seven: Findings and Conclusion

The broad aim of this qualitative enquiry was to explore the impact of instrumental, educational policy on informal, transformative, adult education. More specifically, to find out if there was any substance to Doyle's claim that the WEA - as a site of such practice - is under threat from the state's ideological restructuring of the sector. To this end, the research focussed on four specific questions:

1. Is the structure of the WEA important in supporting the activity of its key agents (the former Tutor Organisers), and the delivery of its historic educational mission?
2. To what extent do internal and external developments have an impact on organisational structure, and does this affect WEA agents and the mission?
3. Are the individual identities of agents important in shaping the WEA's organisational identity?
4. What opportunities exist for the former Tutor Organisers to exercise agency, and for the WEA to continue delivering socially purposeful education?

### Research Findings

#### **1. Is the structure of the WEA important in supporting the activity of its key agents (the former Tutor Organisers) and the delivery of its historic educational mission?**

The original associative nature of the WEA (pre-1991), with its semi-autonomous Branches and Districts, was key in supporting a wide diversity of agents and their individual interpretations of the organisational mission. The level of autonomy built in to its very structure gave Tutor Organisers the freedom to develop their agency (in line with their commitments), putting them at the centre of educational activity and furnishing them with enough power locally, to be able to bring about these interpretations independently from the rest of the Association. This way of working was empowering for Tutor Organisers, and crucial for the development of their own agency - but also the agency of others - especially students who, as part of the special relationship with tutors: negotiated the curriculum and took an active role in WEA provision, to ensure that it successfully addressed the objectives of the mission in a meaningful, local, context.

Under this structure, agents could 'go off at a tangent' and experiment, which often led to very creative forms of adult learning: pushing the WEA to the cutting edge of community education initiatives. This broad, flexible and informal approach to educational provision, resulted in an adult curriculum to suit many tastes - and included the kinds of short courses in literature, or feminism which, as we know from the participants, played a vital role in building agency, and in attracting agents to become involved with the WEA. This organic, democratic approach could have only been supported by a structure that acknowledged the primacy of experience over formal qualifications: with an orientation to engagement and participation in education, rather than accreditation, an approach which extended to WEA staff, as well as its voluntary lay members.

Whatever else has been said about the WEA, it is clear that since its inception, one of its most undisputable functions has been to generate interest in learning, and this - up until the integration of the WEA in 1991- was largely achieved through its structural arrangements, which intentionally encouraged and supported a variety of people, with very different motivations, to join the WEA. Essentially designed to attract, nurture, and reproduce agents of every kind and at every level, this structure was informed by a sound knowledge of how movements work, and acknowledged the importance of harnessing the potential of anyone, and everyone, through meaningful forms of engagement. In return for nurturing and supporting emergent agents, the organisation could anticipate some personal contribution that would invigorate the movement, serving to re-generate it, as part of an on-going cycle.

The re-structuring of the WEA, which began in earnest in the early 90's - and continued to incorporate the radical restructure in 2004 - has effectively redesigned the WEA, making it virtually impossible for its agents to engage in the activities necessary to sustaining an educational movement. Although still committed to providing educational opportunities for disadvantaged adults, the WEA is fundamentally changed at a structural level: allowing the state and its functionalist, regulatory, bodies that oversee adult education, too much influence to direct the WEA. These structural changes have struck at the philosophical

core of the WEA, circumventing the need for internal dialogue between tutors and learners. It has weakened the learners' representative voice within the Association, turning the purpose and practices of the WEA on its head, as it increasingly delivers an education service to the specification of the state, rather than the demands and needs of its adult learners.

## **2. To what extent do internal and external developments have an impact on organisational structure, and does this affect WEA agents and the mission?**

Internal and external developments have impacted greatly on the WEA's structure, agents, and organisational mission. This owes much to the influential tripartite forces that first created the WEA, and the relationship they fostered with the Association's principal funder: the state. Whilst this relationship has come under plenty of scrutiny and criticism, the WEA has never loosened these ties, and has therefore remained vulnerable to shifts in policy and subject to increasing state intervention: affecting the organisation's direction, and its agents' practices. As a result of this continuing relationship, external policy still is the major driver of change for the WEA, and although it has benefitted directly from state support (enabling its rapid growth at the turn of the 20th century, and expansion in the 70's); it has equally been affected by a more hostile policy environment (struggling to maintain provision amidst the cuts of the 80's, and the changeover to contracts in the 90's), and the marketisation of the sector which has left an indelible mark on the WEA's organisational system, curriculum, and teaching methods. The effects of policy and state intervention on the WEA over the last 40 years, have all but transformed the Association, enticing, or forcing it away from the tradition of andragogy and collectivist, informal learning methods towards individualised, formal, accredited courses, leading the WEA to increasingly offer learning that is in line with current policy, for example Skills for Life or employability courses.

Despite these contradictions however, WEA agents, driven by the desire to re-unite the organisation with its special mission, have periodically instigated important internal developments that have had a huge impact on the Association. This shows the WEA to be

a tenaciously competitive organisation, with a survival instinct keen enough to allow its agents to copy provision, as well as innovate. However, this organisational ability to reinvent itself has not been without controversy, and such developments, often supported by external funds and operating outside of the WEA's movement structure, have split opinion and divided the membership. These divisions have not entirely healed, nor have they been adequately addressed at an organisational level, because even though some of these initiatives have evolved to form two of its three core programme areas, they remain distinct and separate strands of practice, with their practitioners having little in common with other WEA tutors, and their students rarely crossing over into other forms of WEA provision.

### **3. How important are the individual identities of agents in shaping the WEA's organisational identity?**

The individual identities of agents have, up until 2004, been extremely important in shaping the WEA's organisational identity: Tutor Organisers enjoyed high levels of autonomy and interpreted the mission in ways that played to their personal strengths and interests. I have illustrated this in chapter five, showing how the individual identities of agents emerged with a unique patterning of concerns, forged from their own experience, and used in a professional setting to develop work streams centring on those concerns, which in Jim's case was around raising class consciousness, and in Pat's case focussed on the issues of gender inequality. In fact, all the participants admit that this freedom to pursue their interests - in order to develop provision that could transform society - was one of the main reasons they joined the WEA. Indeed, without such motivations, it would be difficult to imagine how agents might have invested themselves in the role, an essential characteristic of the WEA Tutor Organiser, as they were the ones who primarily breathed life into the mission. The power of personal contributions (based on the concerns of individual identities) is also evident by the way they do, or do not, change over time: whether agents stick with their original commitments as Jim does, or transvalue and subordinate them as Pat did.

This phenomenon extends to the rest of the cohort too, with agents sometimes moving on from their original concerns - and indeed the sphere of educational delivery - to take on new and different priorities. Nigel is a good example of this when he shifted from a very long, active involvement with trade union education, to embed performance management throughout the WEA. These contributions have directly led to the development of provision or practices which, whilst showing the WEA to be a flexible and creative organisation, have caused some level of internal stress. This is because the educational philosophies underpinning this amount of diversity are essentially incongruent. Whilst this is not necessarily a problem for a democratic organisation that values diversity, it becomes one when the dominant discourse seeks and values standardisation in education. Consequently, the performativity of positivist discourse effectively homogenises teaching and learning, triggering structural and long lasting *cultural* changes within educational organisations. Thus, it is probable that in the years since 2004, the WEA has begun to shift from its historical position of 'ideational diversification' (Archer, 2000, p.275) to one of increasing organisational conformity.

If, however, WEA agents generally share the same kind of intellectual temperament as the participants of this study, they will own considerable analytical powers - and have a level of political astuteness that may cause them to interrogate, rather than accommodate such changes. Such characteristics should not come as a surprise, as historically, WEA Tutor Organisers have had to shoulder a high level of responsibility, and have routinely interpreted an emancipatory mission against the back-drop of an often challenging and volatile political environment. Whilst all the participants have this bent, and are committed to democracy in education and education for democracy, not all of the participants have a political identity or ideological attachment, but *most* do: describing themselves as anti-imperialists, socialists or feminists. This is interesting, as there is a perception amongst some of the cohort that the WEA and its agents now, are much less politically motivated than they used to be.

#### **4. What opportunities exist for the former Tutor Organisers to exercise agency and for the WEA to continue delivering socially purposeful education?**

The former Tutor Organisers maintain that, despite some fairly radical changes to its structure and practices, the WEA does deliver worthwhile educational opportunities in Skills for Life and employability skills, and also that other 'fine possibilities' exist, for example work around the health inequalities agenda. However, it is questionable whether these educational activities constitute socially purposeful education, or indeed, whether they can create agents who can contribute to the regenerative cycle upon which an emancipatory educational movement depends. Yet some of the participants identified that they *do* get the chance to work to the classic WEA brief - and in the 'good' tradition of adult education - for example, the community development project mentioned by Sheila, or Rob's involvement in developing the training package on global education, but they *also* admit that such opportunities are, in fact, occasional, and often, externally funded.

The disappearance of opportunities to participate in socially purposeful education becomes evident, when former Tutor Organisers relate the impact of the 2004 restructure on their role, which has essentially taken them away from informal engagement activity, to focus on organisational management and quality assurance issues. One might say that as newly appointed Regional Educational Managers this was to be expected, but might it not have been reasonable to expect other tutors to have taken their place? It seems from the narrative evidence that this has not been the case, and organisers now (or programme managers) invariably follow a more standardised approach to teaching and learning that is promoted through one of the WEA's many curriculum groups.

As the experience of; knowledge about; and participation in, socially purposeful education diminishes, it might even be questionable if WEA tutors of the future will be able to engage in the tradition. The only other possibility to practice socially purposeful education was through subversion, and although some participants did admit to subverting the agenda, it was on a localised scale and acknowledged as an unsustainable option for the WEA in the longer term.

## Conclusion

It is clear from this research that the structures once supporting socially purposeful education in the WEA have changed, and the kind of educational possibilities emerging under the 2004 regime diverge from what the Association has historically been about. Some might see this as evidence that the WEA is moving with the times, and that the restructure was a timely catalyst to jettison the WEA from its archaic 19th century structure into the 21st century. However, as the findings of this study show, not all participants share this view, with some of the WEA's 'agents-as-activists' believing the reorganisation of 2004 to have sounded the death knell of the WEA as a *movement*, and with it, education for democracy and the lay tradition of democracy in education.

It is also apparent that the educational landscape has changed and the spaces where informal, transformative adult education used to occur have been squeezed, making it extremely challenging for adult educators in the WEA (and beyond) to practice what they commonly refer to as socially purposeful education. As I have outlined in chapter two, the performative instrumental forces that have shaped education over the last 40 years - and which continue to do so - mean that this form of adult education now hangs in the balance, but it *ought* to be safe-guarded because it is this form of praxis that is extremely effective in breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

As the gains of free, universal, comprehensive education have now largely been reversed by the marketisation of education, there is once again a growing divide in Britain which should be of some concern to the state: firstly, because it has a social cost, blighting the lives of individuals, communities, and society; and secondly, because it has a financial cost, as rising levels of disadvantage burden the Welfare State, which is then forced to support a great 'swathe' of people who, as a result of having their 'dreams deferred', are confined to the 'swine heap' (Williams, appendix 3) and unable to make their own contributions.

The change in administration from New Labour in 2005/6 - when I first interviewed the participants - to the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2010 when this research

was being written up, has not altered this picture. In fact, the trends of professionalism, managerialism and commodification in public services - so prominent under New Labour - have escalated. However, unlike New Labour, the Coalition have not advanced these discourses to demonstrate the efficiency, effectiveness, and economy of the public sector (or, as in the case of education, to widen participation), but to dismantle it. This includes the National Health Service and all forms of public education, making British society even more exclusive, unequal and unjust.

Given the obvious need, the question arises as to whether the state can afford *not* to act, but as history shows: unless facing a crisis which threatens to destabilise the establishment, the state usually does not act – or if it does - provides only short-term relief as a remedial measure. Moreover, as *Government* policy seems to be the *primary obstacle* in providing genuine support for informal, transformative adult education, the WEA might have to critically review its relationship with the state, should it want to pursue this strand of unfunded provision. Current evidence suggests that the WEA *does* want to do this, and has demonstrated this recently in a variety of ways: tweets, blogs and lunchtime seminars, and in more formal ways too: through its regional Annual General Meetings (WEA, 2012a) which resulted in a renewed commitment to socially purposeful education. Even more recently at the WEA's Biennial National Conference (WEA, 2013d) a workshop entitled: 'Education with a Social Purpose' was massively oversubscribed, indicating a resurgence of interest in 'really useful knowledge'.

The findings of this thesis indicate that the Association's continuing relationship with the state has, and will continue to compromise the WEA, affecting its ability to provide socially purposeful education. Indeed, under the WEA's present arrangements, its provision has arguably become more driven (and skewed) under the Skills Funding Agency, than it was under the Learning and Skills Council, when this enquiry first began. In this climate, despite the organisational will, it will be extremely challenging for the WEA to incorporate any *meaningful* definition of socially purposeful education into courses that it is *contracted* to provide.

If the WEA does indeed find a way to do this, it still has some considerable work to do to define and deliver what it means by socially purposeful education. The educational ideas presented in chapter two of this thesis, together with the experiences of six of its longest serving agents and the current activities of the WEA (detailed above) could provide a useful working definition, that would:

1. take into account the pressures and barriers disadvantaged adult learners faced
2. create imaginative and entertaining resources to engage with
3. offer contextualised learning experiences that break down the false dichotomy in education
4. make use of the values and language of adult learners
5. involve adult learners in critical education which help them gain another perspective on their own lives
6. build informal relationships based on respect
7. acknowledge the primacy of the adult learner's experience through dialogue
8. take a holistic approach to knowledge that is not confined by discipline or restricted by sequential learning
9. not co-opt working class people and their values into middle class models of education

However, this would demand a significant re-emphasis of the WEA's current educational priorities which gear the Association towards delivering Skills for Life and employability courses (WEA, 2012a). Whilst the research participants saw some merit in this work, they were largely of the opinion that such work should not be the *prime* focus of the WEA, and some of the cohort expressed deep reservations about this kind of educational activity on the basis that it would not create WEA activists; or be able to change communities; or for that matter, actively involve adults in the process of defending their democratic rights; a theme of continuing salience in the WEA today (WEA, 2012a).

This draws me back to the primary task of adult education, which is about facilitating a deeper understanding of the problems that cause disadvantage, and to encourage adult learners to participate in finding solutions (Boggs, 1991) in order, "To work for a political community in which democracy has some meaning" (Smith, 1994, p.4). It is precisely this function that is now under threat: not only because an instrumental educational climate is restricting this function, but because democracy itself is changing, and the trend towards supra-state structures of governance is resulting in a, "Virtual disappearance of the ... public places...where issues...can be debated" (Jarvis, 1993 p.8).

Taking all this into consideration, how is the WEA to move forward if it is to realise its ambition of delivering socially purposeful education to those who need it most? In light of the evidence, perhaps the only real way would be to loosen the ties with the state and regain some of its lost autonomy. However, as the WEA receives a huge amount of financial support from the state, this would not be easy. That said, it would not be impossible either, as the example of NIACE illustrates: an organisation that has moved from being an, "Entirely grant funded organisation to one earning over 80% of its income through a mixture of contracted development and research activity, consultancy, publishing and conferences" (Derrick, et al., 2011, p.247).

With its unique role and long history as a provider of, and campaigner for adult education, the WEA is arguably well placed to do something similar. Indeed, for all the reasons I have outlined in the foregoing argument, the WEA *ought* to reconsider its role and position within English adult education, and there are signs - at a regional and national level - that this is happening. At its most recent conference, Ruth Spellman called for the WEA to return to its roots as a radical campaigning body for adult education (WEA, 2013d). In the Yorkshire & Humber region, one of the key priorities highlights a need to, '*develop new structures*' to enable the WEA to move forward (WEA, 2012a, p.1), implying that the WEA's radical restructure of 2004 and its, "Commitment to proper levels of public accountability" (Doyle, 2003, p.87), may not be entirely facilitative of the way the WEA wants to deliver teaching and learning (ibid).

## Implications of this research for the WEA

If structural arrangements, systems and procedures are compromising the Association for the reasons outlined in this study, and if the WEA is actively trying to bring about more facilitative structures and practices to support its unique purpose (as I have acknowledged here), then the insights gained from this research are both useful and timely. Using a novel, but relevant application of Archer's theory of human agency, I have demonstrated a new way of looking at the WEA's identity which takes into account the messiness of real (organisational) life. This critical realist approach enables the WEA to move away from the well-worn debates of the past towards a new vantage point, which, it is hoped, will engage the WEA to adopt a critical understanding about the complexities of the structure-agency relationship, and to use the insights from this to nurture a more purposeful concept of the corporate agent: one that could actively assist the WEA in its present and future struggles.

Before I elaborate on this, I should say that the limitations and constraints of this research have meant that I have not been able to follow up on some very interesting topics that emerged during the process, but which would provide fine research possibilities in the future, for example: whether WEA tutors since 2004 have similar political commitments to the participants in this study; or whether feminist ideology continues to play an influential role for women in the WEA; or indeed, if the WEA has broadened its understanding of the 'working class'. However, what this research does offer is a unique opportunity for the WEA to interrogate, *for itself*, the efficacy of its own systems and structures, and to make good use of Archer's concept of the corporate agent.

Whilst other theories of identity could have opened up interesting and informative perspectives on the narrative data, it is Archer's concept of the corporate agent that I believe is of most value to the WEA today. These agents, who acquire their considerable powers through being able to develop a collective consciousness, are as the narrative evidence reveals, powerful enough to transform individuals, organisations and society. Thus, it follows, that they are also powerful enough - if given the opportunity- to bring about 'elaborations' that are intentionally oriented to exact the WEA's emancipatory purpose.

Whatever the WEA decides, it is of course vital that its members and students are informed and involved in the debate about what happens next, and to take up fresh opportunities to reignite its intellectual life by engaging anyone out there who is interested in good, adult education, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. This might already be happening in parts of the WEA, but is it happening in a planned and systematic way across the whole of the organisation? Entirely in tune with its democratic sensibilities, this approach offers the WEA an active and empowering role that existing and new tutors alike may welcome, and in investing in this role would reclaim what is arguably an essential WEA characteristic: human agency, returning the WEA to the good tradition in adult education practice, and bringing it closer to the notion of 'really useful knowledge'.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

**[Name of WEA staff member] on 11 August 2006 at 10:07 +0000 wrote:**

Dear All

I have just been interviewed by a research student (mature, part-time and with a background in community education) on the changing roles and responsibilities of WEA Tutor Organisers. I'm not quite sure where she is going with the research, it is still in the early formative stages, but in the interest of supporting adult students and pushing back the frontiers of knowledge(!?) I was willing to give her a couple of hours of my time.

She wants to talk to TOs with a long history in the WEA and I suggested your names. Hope that is ok. She is reluctant to cold call you so I said I would raise the matter with you and let her know if you are happy for her to at least contact you herself.

I enclose a letter she sent to me for further details. By the way she is willing to come to you for the interview.

Best wishes. [Name of WEA staff member]

Workers' Educational Association

xxx Regional Office

xxxx

xxxx

## Appendix 2

Date: Thu, 2 Nov 2006 09:15:04 +0000

Subject: Re: hello!

To: [Researcher's email address]

From: [...]@wea.org.uk

hello Sam

it was grand to meet you and to be asked intelligent questions - that's the tradition all right!

And yes I've spoken now to both xxxx and member of our management team and also to xxxx Organiser at the moment for xxxx and also member of Management team - she's also worked in xxxx so might be able to offer a slightly different WEA picture

you can get them at

[...]@wea.org.uk and

[...]@wea.org.uk

and they're both looking forward to meeting you

Best of luck with the writing and the studies and more power to you

[Name of WEA staff member] X

## Appendix 3

### An Open Letter to WEA Tutors



RAYMOND WILLIAMS

*University Lecturer in English and Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge*

*Dear Colleague*

For the last fifteen years I have been working as a fulltime tutor in adult education. I must have taught more than a thousand adult students, and I think I have taken every kind of class; from tutorials to short terminals, and helped in every kind of residential course; from summer to weekend schools. It has, been a good job, but always, as for most tutors, it has been more than a job. At the risk of repeating what many tutors already know, I want to pass on a few reflections on the kind of job it is and the kind of life it is. This is the best way I know of telling other people about the WEA.

Almost all my students came to me through the WEA. I went to the District Secretary in Cambridge, when I returned there after the war, and he found me a class in a village in the Fens, mainly of farm workers. The same summer I went to the General Secretary of the WEA in London, and asked him for similar work in the South West, where I was then planning to move. He put me in touch with the District Secretary down there, and some classes were arranged. Soon afterwards, however, I got a job with the Oxford Tutorial Classes Committee, and went to meet another District Secretary, in the South East. Once again the classes were arranged. In fact, wherever you are in Britain, this organisation exists, and tutors can get in touch with it. But nobody, as I soon learned, should take it for granted. In the South East I joined the WEA District Committee, elected from the many branches in the area. I soon realized the problems of keeping this kind of voluntary organisation going: money problems, inevitably; problems of purpose, as the WEA insisted on keeping its own standards of good work however many difficulties then arose; problems of spirit, as the struggling new branch, or the old branch in temporary decline, cast doubts on the viability of the whole enterprise but gradually gained strength from the experience and determination of the others they met. Any tutor who thinks the WEA exists, ready-made, just to provide him with students, will soon learn differently. The branch at Portslade, the branch at Battle, the branch at Hastings, the student group at Seaford : it sounds very formal on paper, but sometimes these are lively organisations with many people taking part, and sometimes just the odd individual, hanging on with a scratch committee, trying to keep the work going. And the difference isn't an act of God or an act of sociology: it has everything to do with the quality of people and the quality of their vision. I remember now, with deep respect, the very many people I met who gave their

time to this work, who went beyond their job to encourage and strengthen it, and who are the WEA. Any tutor who gets in touch with them will be getting in touch with one of the best and deepest traditions in Britain that of voluntary, independent, serious work. If he is a real WEA tutor a term we use among ourselves to cover many kinds of people but all with certain qualities of recognition and concern-he will be glad and proud to work with them.

There isn't any rule about how to do it; there never is; in any movement of actual and varying people. I have seen tutors build or save a branch, by giving enough of their students this sense of common purpose. Many tutors work with their local branches and districts, as members of committees or helping to organise special functions. But sometimes I have seen a tutor almost kill a branch, by - regarding it as his private recruiting organisation, and by trying to do too much in the wrong way. If you go in as a tutor you must go in as an equal, trying to share in activity and to spread activity, in a common effort.

But why, should tutors do anything like this at all? First, I think, because the WEA represents a vital tradition which we are always in danger of losing and which we can never afford to lose. The organisation of social justice, and the institutions of democracy are worth working for, in the society as a whole. But haven't many of us realised, in the years since the war; that you can have some of these things, or approximations to them and still not the spirit which is their real life? I've often defined my own social purpose as the creation of an educated and participating democracy. The WEA taught me much, in defining these terms. It has always stood for the principle that ordinary people should be highly educated, as an end justifying itself and not simply as a means to power. Equally it has always stood for the principle that society is a method of common and general participation, and it exemplifies this in its own work: It does not see the good things in society as benefits to be handed down by an elite, or as bargaining counters to win the favours of an electorate. In the end, it has insisted, they will only be good things if people have made them for themselves.

This is worth repeating, in the 1960s, when many people will tell you that the WEA's historic mission is over. With the coming of better opportunities in the schools, the exceptional mind in the poor family is spotted young, and is given a real chance. Yes, but this was never at the heart of the WEA's purpose. Of course the exceptional minds must get their chance, but what about everyone else? Are they simply to be treated as rejects? The WEA stands for purposes which some people, including some reformers, cannot even begin to understand. It stands for an educated democracy, not for a newly mobile and more varied elite. Its historic mission is as urgent and central today as it was in the 1900s, because its basic challenge stands out much more clearly, and is no longer propped up by simple missionary feelings, that the fortunate should help the unfortunate, or by simple class feelings, that the odd pearl should be picked out of the swine heap. The WEA has never looked at the world in this way, and because it doesn't it is more up-to-date, more genuinely in touch with real needs, than the people who want to persuade us that its fundamental aspirations are simply old stuff. They are joined by the cynics who find it damnably easy to point out how little, comparatively, has been achieved; what a tough fight the WEA is still having. It is quite true: we are fighting for our lives. But for our lives: that is the whole point. And it isn't what some abstraction called the WEA now does. It is what we do, as tutors, students and friends.

There is another main reason why tutors should join and work with the WEA, This is a matter of the health of their own academic subject. There are some important examples here. There was the profound stimulus, to all the social studies, from the contact of men like Tawney and Cole with the realities of working-class life and history, through the WEA. There has been, more recently, the profound stimulus to literary and cultural studies, by the fact of contact between tutors trained in academic disciplines, affected sometimes by fashions, and students who live in less specialised cultural worlds and who force the tutors to follow the questions of value right through. This is the reality behind the claim that, in the WEA, tutors and students meet as equals. Of course the tutor knows his own discipline better, and wants to help the students to learn it, but he may not

know how his discipline looks to people outside it may not know the gaps between academic thinking and actual experience among many people; he may not know when, in the pressure of experience, a new discipline has to be created. Working with the WEA is not just a matter of committees, important as they are. It is also a matter of constant experiment in teaching, and the WEA is one of the very few institutions in which this is possible, because of its freedom from external requirements. Just because there can be no reward but increased understanding, the challenge to new and imaginative teaching is constant. This may be a new method in an experienced class, or the profoundly important work with new kinds of students, who have never before made much contact with formal education. In recent years I have discussed D. H. Lawrence with working miners; discussed methods of argument with building workers; discussed newspapers with young trade unionists; discussed television with apprentices in training. To me these have been formative experiences, and I have learned as much as I have taught. A whole world of work is waiting, of many kinds, for all who are ready to try it. The next few years may see a transformation in trade union education, which is of vital social importance. The development of work with women's organisations and young workers is also extremely promising. All this, of course, in addition to the familiar work in tutorial classes and residential courses, where experiment in teaching is often just as important. But none of us can sit back and wait for this to happen. It will only happen as widely as it needs to if we all get in and work.

I have mentioned various kinds of satisfaction and stimulus. I need hardly add that there are regular disappointments, and that the going is often very hard indeed. At the first tutorial class I ever took there were three people present, and one of these had only come to see the thing properly started. We had to join that class with one in a neighbouring village. And then there are the rows in branches, the jealousies, the intrigues, that you can chew over in all their bitterness during the long winter journeys. No good is done by concealing any of this, or the constant national rows about the best way to organise adult education, the sense of continual crisis. It's enough to put anybody off, until you get back a sense of proportion and remember the deep needs, the real pressures, behind it all. You must make up your own mind about this as about all the other things, but I can say, for myself, that if I had these last fifteen years back, to use as I liked, I would want to do the same work again, with my friends, students and colleagues in the WEA: only trying to do it better, by understanding it better. Meanwhile if you think I can help at all, with any question or problem, do write to me, or come and see me. I can always be found care of the WEA.

Yours Sincerely

Raymond Williams

Copies, and full publications list, are available from the W. E. A. Central Office, Temple House, 27 Portman Square, London W.1.

## Appendix 4

### Questions, Sub-questions and Prompts for Interview.

1. Why did you join the WEA? When? How did you feel about it then? What does the WEA mean to you? How did you come to join the organisation? What did you feel you wanted to contribute to the WEA? Has your role changed at all from then and now?
2. Do you think the WEA differs from other providers of adult education? Can you tell me in what ways? Does the WEA differ only in *what* it offers or are there other differences in working for them? How do your experiences of being with the WEA compare to any other organisations you have experience of?
3. Using your experience, what role has the WEA played in educating and training the public? What do you think/feel about this? What do you see as the role of education today? Has this changed whilst you have been in the WEA? (Educating Versus training, are skills becoming more dominant? How does it relate to the mission? What about education and democracy? WEA-dependence or independence?)
4. Have you noticed any changes to the organisation since you have been involved? What do you think about these changes? (Structural reorganisation, watersheds in the 40's, 50's, 70's & 90's). Can you describe what sort of situation the WEA is in now and how you feel about it? Where do those changes come from?
5. Change may be inevitable, but what would you say must remain the same for the WEA and why?
6. Is there anything I haven't asked, or given you enough time to comment upon which you would like to talk about?

## Appendix 5

Sam Davis

[Researcher's Address]

Dear

It was good to talk with you on the phone the other day. As promised, I have written a few lines here about the nature of the research and what sort of involvement is foreseen. Currently, the working title for my research is:

### **A Crisis of Identity? – Personal Perspectives on Professional Identity in the WEA.**

The overall aim of this study is to gain an insight as to whether the professional roles and relationships of tutor/organisers in the WEA are changing, and if so, could these changes represent a fundamental challenge to the WEA mission? Selecting the vital function of WEA tutor/organisers may not only highlight any changes perceived by individuals, but might also point to wider organisational changes occurring within the WEA. Moreover, by choosing participants who have served the WEA over a considerable length of time, the study would invite broader, generalizable interpretations about the WEA from these initial, personal responses.

As I am interested in your *personal perspectives*, I would like to offer you the opportunity of telling your story, in your own words. I am proposing at this stage a 90minute session, but there might be the possibility of a follow-up interview after the initial transcripts have been completed and sent to you for your comment and approval. Of course you will be free to stop the interview process at any time, or if you wish you may withdraw from the study without any consequence.

Should you wish to continue, you shall receive your own personal copy of the transcription and a copy of the recording itself, allowing you to check the details for accuracy. The necessary amendments will be made and if you are then happy to proceed, a final corrected version of the transcript will be produced and sent to you. I will respect anyone's wishes to exclude any information they deem inappropriate for reproduction in the final thesis.

Furthermore, I can assure you that any taped material will be kept secure and confidential for the duration of the research and shall be destroyed (as agreed with you) on completion of the study. Whilst every effort shall be made to change personal references, it may not be possible to guarantee complete anonymity.

I hope that the material generated by my research will produce some interesting findings that will be of interest to you, of use to the WEA itself, and perhaps attract interest from a wider audience via publication.

If you have any questions or concerns relating to my proposal as outlined in this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me. I will happily address any issues by telephone or email, or when I see you for the first interview.

I look forward to seeing you then.

Yours Sincerely,

Sam Davis.  
[Researcher's email address]  
[Researcher's contact telephone number]

.....

I hereby give my consent to participating in the study outlined above, a copy of which is available for me to keep.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and clarify my concerns.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence.

I understand that complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

I understand the author intends to use the work for possible publication.

Signed.....

Date.....

## Appendix 6

Hello,

My name is Sam Davis and I am currently studying for a professional doctorate in education.

My field of interest is informal education and transformative collective learning for working class people. I am very interested in why working class people (and I include myself in this category) knowingly choose a different model of education with different values to the formal sector. I am convinced of the benefits of this approach, both from a personal and professional standpoint and have chosen to work with disenfranchised communities in this way.

But as a 'professional', I have also become increasingly concerned as to the "take over" of informal education by the formal sector; it has stolen its rhetoric and its models of operation - but has rejected the processes and aims of informal education, which do not lend themselves to an outcome oriented approach (thus is doomed to fail?).

In addition, I am concerned as to how the discourse of managerialism and the quality assurance mechanisms enforced through ALI have impacted on the an area of informal learning.

I am currently working upon a final proposal for my research dissertation and have chosen to concentrate my research on the WEA because the

- \* WEA is a successful organisation that practices informal education
- \* WEA practices are grounded in transformational learning
- \* WEA is from its origins, a working class educational organisation

As a skills for life co-ordinator, I hold grave concerns about the economy being the driver for basic skills education and training. I am also deeply concerned about the government's educational policies in general, which appear to foster a broad liberal education for those who are well placed to take it up, and skills training for those who do not take it up during compulsory education, or who cannot afford to engage. Failure or lack of skills is represented as the fault of the individual, rather than a reflection of structural causes such as class, race and gender.

Thus, the research I would like to undertake would involve tutors who have had a long history with the WEA, to be involved with qualitative research which would throw up a lot of information pertaining to values and how the organisation has changed over the years and why. This could be very powerful stuff, which could highlight a number of factors which currently impact negatively upon the organisation. It is my aim to be able to publish substantial parts of my dissertation.

I have excellent relationships with my local and regional WEA contacts, but feel doing research involving national tutors would make the research more robust and thus more useful for the organisation as a whole. If you are interested in assisting me in this matter,

I would be very grateful if you could contact me on [Researcher's telephone number]

My home e-mail address [...]

Kindest regards,

## Appendix 7

### Jim's Original Transcript:

**SD:** *I will... going to come back to that later on in the questions, but why did you join?*

**Jim:** *How did I get into it?*

**SD:** *Yes.*

**Jim:** *Well it was a very differe...*

**SD:** *And when?*

**Jim:** *I...I went to a catholic grammar school, was brought up in a Irish house in xxx, which was a village that was both a pit village and a steel village, we were surrounded by steel works' chimneys, you either worked in the steel works or you worked in the pits, you were surrounded by pits. And er me dad was Irish so he...he, when he first came over he worked in the pit, then he worked in the steel works but then he'd go of navvying as well, so er I was brought up with all those 3 cultures... Navy culture which was dead romantic for me, cause' they were all you know they all spoke (Jim imitates the men's idiom; SD laughs) and er they all sang songs and still thought this was my dream and we all knew the Clancy Brothers and the Dubliners and all that, so was brought up with lots of music. And steel and coal, my mates dads all worked in, and many of the women as well, worked in steel, you know, so that was xxx and I soon realised it was a wonderful place in many ways, it was, I remember, it was on Nationwide - or whatever it was when I was a kid, one of them programmes, Fife Robertson the guy in the deer stalker, don't know if you remember it - you're too young to remember it, "he used to come along onto the programme and speak into a big microphone like this" and he said, "Today I'm coming from a place called xxx, it is the dirtiest place in Europe" (SD laughs) and I thought that was fantastic, yes! Your place might be mucky but ours is the dirtiest place in Europe, even though it was killing us there was a certain pride in that! And anyway, but out of that I went, cause' I went to a catholic school cause' I was Irish, we got bussed off to this grammar school to be taught by Brothers, in their cassocks and their ( ) and I hated the place even before I went there, um(.) and you know you were kind of bullied into doing well, except by the time I got to about 15 and discovered the youth club and it was in the late 60's and er you know, there was a kind of cultural revolution going on and then I stopped bothering really and er I went into the 6th form, but I was...really didn't want to do any work and you know, I left on very very bad terms really and I went to work with me dad on the pipe lines with the Navvies you know, and um I thought it was wonderful, I was 17 and it was a red hot summer working with all the (.) paddies and what have you on the pipelines and I didn't want to do anything else. And then it got a bit colder, (SD laughs) and I was thinking ooh this isn't alright, not keen on this and then the job finished, was on*

*the dole for a while looking for work on the buildings and in the steel works, er so I'd be about 18 er already thinking um don't fancy a life of this, you know, and for 4 years I worked in the steel works and building sites and what have you, er but at the same time when I was on the dole I went, I started reading. I went into the local library. It's a Carnegie Library in xxx, I'm still involved in fighting to save it now cause' it's just over a century old. And er I started reading books, novels really and I remember thinking that's a nice looking cover, really lovely, yellow and red cover and there were a whole row of them and it was a book called "Crime and Punishment" by a guy called Dostoevsky, (SD laughs) so I read that and it blew my mind, I'd never read anything like it, thought it was just a fluke and then I read the next one which was er, "The Idiot" and er I was utterly and totally...I think the chemicals in the body must have just been right it were like, it were...were like setting a spark onto one of these very you know, fiery chemicals it just went fizz through me' head and I just thought what I want to do for the rest of my life is to read books like that, you know. And so I read a lot of them and then er I, when I was on the dole going into the same place, I saw an advert for a course and it was just up the hill in the old police station, which had become a bit of a meeting room (some ? ) a meeting place, community centre thing and it was, it was a 10 week course offered by a thing called the WEA in English Literature...*

### **Summary of Transcript:**

Jim has fond memories of his family upbringing, and romanticises about the proud and industrious men and women who worked in the local industries. His village was known as the 'dirtiest place in Europe' at the time. Jim had negative experiences of formal schooling, where he was bussed out of the district with other working class Catholic children to attend a Grammar school run by the Brothers. These children were different from the others in dress, language and culture and were treated differently. He left on bad terms in the lower 6th and went navvying with his dad for a summer.

Jim had short periods on the dole in between looking for building work or work in the steelworks for a period of 4 years. It was whilst on the dole that Jim started to read Russian Classics from his local library (which he is now campaigning to save from closure). His first experience of the WEA was as a student on a 10-week literature course looking at 10 English novels.

### **Crafted Narrative:**

I grew up in what was once dubbed by BBC's Nationwide as "the dirtiest place in Europe" – which was in reality a proud pit village where all the men and women either worked in the coal or steel industries. Me' dad was an Irish labourer, and because we were Catholic (like many other kids in the village) I was bussed out to attend the Catholic Grammar School run by the Brothers. I hated it cos' of the Brothers. They had brutal teaching methods and treated us pit village kids differently from the other 'hoity toity' children -and we were different in terms of how we were dressed, our dialect and our culture. My confidence was badly knocked at that school and I ended up believing that I was no good at learning. I left early on very bad terms in the lower sixth, plumping for the life of a labourer with me' dad and his mates.

I loved being around them' navvies; they would sing old Irish songs, tell stories and I thought it were' all dead romantic! The first summer navvying were' great until winter set in and I then began scratching about for somat' else. Between short spells on dole, I worked at steelworks. Working in there were' like being part of a great epic, the sheer size of the place, the heat and the danger...it were' elemental! It were' around this time I started taking off to me' local library, the one I'm trying to save now from closing down! There, I got into reading the Russian Classics, which blew me' mind. It were' like setting a spark onto one of these fiery chemicals, it just went fizz through me' head and I just thought: this is what I want to do for the rest of my life, is to read books like that. One day I saw a WEA flyer advertising a 10-week English Literature course.

**Pat's Original Transcript:**

**SD:** *Yeah, I'm gonna' come back to um that, that whole idea - or that whole area of curriculum development, and who decides what courses, I think I'm gonna come back to that one um... and if I forget remind me cause I think that's a really important one to...to open up. How did you join the WEA and why? And when? (SD: Laughing).*

**Pat:** *Um, well, the first time I ever came across the WEA (knowingly came across it cause' I... there are always instances of people who go to classes and it's a WEA class and they're not aware of who's actually organising it – and since I have been all my life an attender of classes in one area or another, it's quite possible I've been to the WEA class and not known it), but um...the first time I came across the WEA was in xxx um... when, oddly enough, but I think interestingly enough – (laughing) – um... my husband actually got a job as a WEA Tutor Organiser and um... worked from our home in the front room, which became his office, which in those days was just a way T.O's, as they were called, operated, and so I became um... by default really, his secretary, you know... and I pick up the phone, because his phone was the home phone, and people would be asking me questions and a particular call or some particular crisis and so on, and sometimes this could be 10 o'clock on a Saturday night because they thought it was the most important thing in their life and it wasn't in mine (SD laughs) at that particular time of the day that's...so I just got kind of pulled in in that way and became aware of it um... and, and almost immediately became um... not impassioned about it, but thought it was a very very interesting organisation. So, and I did, so I suppose I, I did odd...odd bits of stuff there, I won't go into all the details or we'll be here for 90 days (SD laughs) as you know.*

**SD:** *When was that then?*

**Pat:** *That was in 19... (.) that was between 1972 and 19... yes it would be around 1972. Um...and then we moved, we moved house and we found ourselves in...in xxx and I, I was attending um joint University WEA classes...um at the University of xxx and my husband was then working for the University of xxx in the xxx and, and also I was attending WEA University of xxx courses over in xxx and I suppose the thing that turned, that was the key turning point for me and my relationship with the WEA is that I went to a course in xxx (.) called um... I think it may have been called Women's Lives, I think it had a zappier name than that but I can't... and that was really my first introduction to feminist...um theory, or it didn't, that wasn't it's intention, but for the first time I was in an environment where first of all, people were thinking the same way as I was and also I discovered there is a theoretical framework on which to hang all this, I know that all sounds very pompous these days but it was quite revelatory in those heady days of the mid to late 70's...*

### **Summary of Transcript:**

Pat has attended adult education classes all her life and has possibly, unknowingly, attended WEA classes. The first time she knowingly came across the WEA was in xxx in 1972. Her husband got a job as a Tutor Organiser and worked from their front room at home. That was the way many Tutor Organisers operated back then. Pat became his secretary by default. As well answer the phone, she would deal with particular crises on any day of the week, at any hour, as it was 'the most important thing in their lives'. She got pulled in and became aware of it in this way and thought immediately that it was a very interesting organisation.

From xxx they moved to xxx where Pat attended Joint University WEA classes. These classes were organised by the University of xxx, for which her husband worked. Pat also attended classes in xxx put on by the University of xxx and the WEA. This was the turning point for Pat and her relationship with the WEA as she attended a course called "Women's' Lives". It was her first introduction into feminist theory, although that was not its intention. It was the first time Pat experienced an environment of like-minded people and she found a framework for her thoughts. This was revelatory. The tutor was from the University of xxx, but got a full-time job and recommended Pat pick up her tutoring role.

### **Crafted Narrative:**

The first time I came across the WEA was when my husband got a job as a WEA Tutor Organiser. He worked from our home in the front room and so I became his secretary by default really and just got kind of pulled in. Then I attended joint University WEA classes where my husband was working and at this time I also got involved with the Branch for a while, and by incremental steps I got more involved with the WEA.

I suppose the key turning point for me and my relationship with the WEA was when I went to a course with the intriguing title of 'A Woman's Place'! That was really my first introduction to feminist theory and it was the first time I was in an environment where people were thinking the same way as I was. Many of us were middle class by virtue of the fact that we were professionals or had gone through University, but my roots are quite solidly working class and I think it's also true to say that the majority of them were socialist feminists. The tutor was an extraordinary woman who had a particularly significant effect on my life in terms of the way I

taught, and I subsequently did a Masters. I was just reaching out for courses and people who were building my way of thinking and who I felt comfortable with and who I shared a lot with, so we spawned all sorts of things: consciousness raising groups and all of that, which I look back on and value enormously. I know that all sounds very pompous these days, but it was quite revelatory in those heady days of the mid to late 70's.

## Appendix 8

### WEA Chronology

- 1903
  - WEA founded as 'The Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men,' becoming the Workers Educational Association in 1905.
  - First WEA National Delegate Conference held at Toynbee Hall, London.
- 1904
  - First WEA established at Reading.
- 1905
  - 1000 people attend the National Delegate Conference in Birmingham.
- 1906
  - WEA founder Albert Mansbridge elected full time General Secretary.
- 1907
  - Oxford Conference on 'Oxford and working Class Education'.
  - WEA Working Party on the Education of Women formed.
  - Adoption of the first WEA Constitution.
  - First Districts functioning in the North West & Midlands.
- 1908
  - First tutorial classes organised in Rochdale and Longton.
  - Oxford Conference Report published leading to Government funding for the WEA.
  - Joint Committee of Oxford and WEA established.
  - William Temple elected as first President of the WEA.
  - First issue of The Highway published.
- 1909
  - Central Joint Advisory Committee established.
  - Ruskin College Strike and creation of the Central Labour College.
- 1910
  - First WEA Summer School at Oxford.
- 1912
  - WEA Central Library established at Toynbee Hall.
  - 8 Districts organised in England.
- 1915
  - Mansbridge resigns as General Secretary through ill health.
  - Jimmy Mactavish appointed as General Secretary.
  - Constitutional change gives delegated powers to the Districts.
- 1917
  - WEA lobbies for post-war education reform leading to the 1918 Education Act.
- 1919
  - 219 branches in existence.
  - Scottish District council established.
  - Workers' Education Trade Union Committee formed.

- First woman Tutor Organiser appointed.
- 1922 • WEA demonstrates against Geddes' cuts in public expenditure.
- 1924 • Government grants 'Responsible Body' status to 16 Districts.
- International Conference on Labour Education held at Oxford.
- 1925 • TUC fails to bring WETUC and the National Council of Labour Colleges together.
- 1928 • R.H.Tawney succeeds Temple as WEA President and holds the position till 1944.
- 1934 • WEA 'Sixpenny Library' launched.
- First WEA/International Labour Organisation Summer School held in Geneva.
- 1936 • WEA appoints Youth Officers for work with 18-25's.
- 1939 • 635 Branches across the WEA.
- 27 unions affiliated to WETUC.
- Circulation of The Highway reaches 20,000.
- 1942 • R.A.Butler issues guiding principles for state funding of voluntary associations.
- WEA and NUT campaigns for a new post-war Education Act, enacted in 1944.
- 1945 • Election of a Labour Government, 14 Ministers have a background with the WEA.
- Governments grant regulations relaxed, henceforth grant related to the size of the Districts' programmes.
- Formation of the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations.
- 1952 • Mansbridge dies.
- 1954 • Ashby Committee Report on the Organisation and Finance of Adult Education.
- 1963 • WETUC and NCLC integrated into TUC Regional Education scheme.
- 1966 • National Delegate Conference introduces 'opt out' membership.
- 1969 • Publication of Unfinished Business.
- 1973 • Russell Committee Report on Adult Education.

- 1975 • Alexander Committee Report on Adult Education in Scotland.
- 1976 • £100,000 made available by Government to support the WEA in delivering the 'Russell Priorities'.
- 1983 • Government claws back Districts' surpluses by imposing an 8.3% cut in grant.
- 1988 • Responsible Body status ends.
- 1989 • Government invites WEA to consider receiving grant via LEAs.  
• First 'Return to Learn' programme delivered.
- 1991 • National Delegate Conference agrees an integrated constitution; Welsh and Northern Ireland Districts withdraw from the National Association.  
• EURO-WEA created as the first regional body of the IFWEA.
- 1992 • Further and Higher Education Act passed.
- 1999 • WEA sustains 1,600 partnerships with other organisations and bodies at local and regional levels.
- 2000 • Learning and Skills Act passed, Learning and Skills Council formed.  
• National Delegate Conference agrees 'opt in' membership scheme, to the pre-1966 position.
- 2003 • Following the Moser Report into Skill for Life, literacy, numeracy and ESOL programmes grew and became an integral part of the WEA's curriculum.
- 2003 • WEA celebrated 100 years of providing and campaigning for education.  
• ESOL programmes grew and became an integral part of the WEA's curriculum.
- 2012 • Ruth Spellman was appointed as the first female WEA General Secretary.

Sources: Doyle, A Very Special Adventure: the illustrated history of the workers' educational association, 2003; WEA, A Brief History of the WEA, 2013.