**“How will I know when I’m ready?” Re-imagining FE/HE ‘transitions’ as collaborative identity work**

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**Abstract**

Drawing on the findings of a QAA funded, multi-institutional, regional project, *Transitions West Midlands*, this paper works with Further Education (FE) students’ transition narratives as they look forward to, and back from the move from FE to HE and explores the role of the local, contextual factors that impact on the student transition experience. We mobilise Reay et al’s (2009) notion of ‘institutional habitus’ to draw attention to the discourses about transition at play within the institutional context and explore how these function to pattern and frame students’ world figuring (Gee, 2011) and concept making, about what ‘transition’ might be like. We notice the dominance of a nebulous but fixed/stable concept of skill acquisition, understood as ‘HE readiness’ that drives particular approaches to student identity work characterised by self-recognitions of deficit, not being ‘ready’ or ‘good enough’ to transition. Readiness, we contend, works paradoxically to background and under-value the assets, for example the resilience associated with managing competing demands and navigating complexity, that students might bring to ‘transition events’. We trace the reproduction of this mis-recognition in students’ reports of their interactions with teachers, which play out, in turn, equally limiting narratives of FE teacher identity. By way of response we suggest that re-imagining ‘transition’ as essentially social, a process of becoming, rather than skills acquisition might re-position students and their teachers as more active, agentic protagonists in the narratives they make, and make available, about what transition can and might mean. Working reflexively together to understand transition as identity work might enable, we contend, students and teachers to recover, recognise and put to work the rich assortment of assets and resources that students bring to the process of FE/HE transition.

**Keywords:** Further Education, Higher Education, Transitions, student and teacher identity.

***Introduction***

Massification of the United Kingdom (UK) higher education (HE) sector (Scott, 2000) has seen young people’s (18-30) first time participation rates rise exponentially from 12% in 1979 to 48% in 2015 (DfE, 2016). The HE sector has developed and expanded to meet this new demand with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) reporting, as of March 2015, that it was providing funding to 130 higher education institutions (HEIs) and 214 further education (FE) colleges, clearly illustrating a shift in the HE landscape from a predominantly HEI based model to a more substantially mixed economy within which FE has a strong and growing presence and significance. In response there has been a groundswell of interest from institutions (schools, colleges, higher education institutions) and stake-holders (students, teachers, academics, policy-makers, researchers) about how best to support a ‘new’ more diverse student body, with many students having no family tradition of HE participation, to make successful transitions into a more diverse range of HE programmes As such there is a rich, constantly evolving research literature relating to the HE transition experience of students from groups who have traditionally been under-represented in HE (add Raey et al 2001, Raey et al, 2009; Bradley et al 2013, Lowe and Cook 2003). Leese (2010) offers a useful synthesis of key debates describing demands for a cultural shift that ensures the ‘new student’ body are better served by a higher education experience that has moved “away from an expectation that the student needs to ‘adapt’ in order to ‘fit in’ to HE” and a requirement that “more analysis of the needs of the proposed ‘new student’” be undertaken (Leese 2010: 6). This analysis tends to position teachers, at the ‘export’ (school or college) or ‘receiving’ phase (HE) of a transition event, as central protagonists in the step changes required to achieve more successful outcomes for students. However this is often articulated as rather a ‘technical’ call to pedagogical action requiring teachers to reflect more, plan differently, and provide the kind of “compensatory experiences that bring students’ cultural capital to an equitable position with other students” (Leese 2010:5). Whilst these sorts of narratives aim to challenge the status quo, resist deficit models of the ‘new student’ and re-conceptualise transition as a longitudinal process that does not begin and end at the point of admission to higher education focus but reaches much further into a students’ journey, they continue to play out a traditional dynamic of student/teacher relations that reproduces rather than disrupts the paradigmatic tenet that building an HE identity is a predictable journey with a fixed final objective of successful *assimilation*. In such a transaction student identity must become mobile/elastic whilst teacher identity remains stable meaning that concept making around final goals, being and becoming successful in higher education, is orientated towards fixed points on a horizon that is always already framed by teachers’ own experiences and identities even if, or where, the journey (planning, curriculum content, access to forms of social or cultural capital) is innovative or novel. This projects an ‘institutional habitus’ (Raey et al 2001, Raey et al 2009), or discursive milieu, that in turn patterns the range of meanings that students make and take about transition structuring, in Foucault’s terms, ‘the possible field of action’ (Foucault, 1982:221).

In this paper we draw on empirical material from a multi-institutional, regional study of FE/HE transition, *Transitions West Midlands*, to focus in on the production of HE student identities at the locus of an FE college context to explore the discursive work that teachers and students do towards imagining and making HE identities and the role of institutional habitus in these processes. The project sought to explore the transition experiences of the ‘diaspora’ of students from a single college, particularly those with non-traditional HE profiles following highly vocational level 3 programmes, as they progressed on to HE programmes both at the FE college itself and three local, partner, post 1992 HEIs.

We set our descriptions of this work alongside other narratives in the data: the more self-conscious ‘technical’ work of planning for transition; and students’ hopes, fears and aspirations for the future. What emerges is a complex picture of under-acknowledged tensions and contradictions that raise questions about the adequacy of dominant ‘transition paradigms’ to provide meaningfully transformative transition experiences for Leese’s ‘new student’ body. We make us of Gale and Parker’s (2012) third model of ‘transition as becoming’ and Neary’s notion of ‘student as producer’ (2010a, 2010b) to imagine the praxis of an alternative more expansive paradigm of transition, ‘rhizo-transition’, which, rather than seeking to assimilate student identities, re-conceptualises higher education as always already in movement. That is to say a project in flux in which identity transition is an ‘everyday ambition’ of ‘ordinary’ learning *throughout a programme of study.* This analysis moves us away from an isolated transition event *to* HE towards HE *as* transition, an always already event*.* This implicates a wider range of actors, teachers and students in both higher education and further education (and by extension equally in the schools sector), in collaborative identity work requiring a self-consciousness about the ways discourse works within institutional (and individual) habitus to generate and sustain ideas about ‘transition’, and a meta-awareness about why this might matter most especially to non-traditional students.

**The Transitions West Midlands (TWM) Project**

The TWM project aimed to offer new insights into the first hand experiences of students who’d made the move or were preparing to make the move from FE to Higher HE within the West Midlands region. Working with one FE college the study followed the ‘diaspora’ of the college’s students planning to move, or reflecting back on a move, into higher education either at the college or at one of three post ’92 universities within the region. The project, which sought to build new knowledge about transition within the locality and to produce practical outcomes for the partnership of participating institutions, was driven by three key questions:

How do prospective students from under-represented groups in higher education understand/perceive their support needs prior to transition?

How do HE students from under-represented groups self-define the enablers and barriers to effective transition?

How do HE and FE institutions best support students from under-represented groups as they progress through the various different stages of transition from further to higher education? Students were invited to participate in a cross-institutional e-survey and attend focus groups at each location.

In total 270 students participated in the e-survey, 82% were female and 18% male. Of these 5% were studying an FE course in an FE college, 15% were studying an HE course in an FE college and 80% were studying HE in HE. Although the bulk of participants (41%) were aged between 20 and 25, the whole group varied significantly in age from 16-19 (15%) and 50+ (3%). Only 256 participants self-reported ethnic group (in a free text box) of these the majority, 59%, identified as ‘white’ with the next largest groups Black African, British Asian and ‘multiple ethic group’ all at 4% and Black British and Black Caribbean at 3% and 2.7% respectively.

Some respondents preferred to use a geo/political identifier such as English (1.5%), British (9%), European (1 respondent), Chinese (3 respondents), Pakistani (5%), Albanian (1 respondent) whilst others used religious identifiers such as Jewish (1 respondent), Hindu (2 respondents). This degree of diversity corresponds with the 2011 census for the region in which 42% of respondents self-identified as belonging to an ethnic group other than white (Birmingham.gov.uk: 2014)

Two semi-structured focus groups and two paired interviews were undertaken with self-selecting e-survey participants. In total 19 students participated in the focus groups, 15 female and 4 male. They were grouped as follows: FE students preparing for next steps into HE or employment; HE students studying in an FE institution; HE students who had progressed from FE studying in an HE institution. The focus group discussion with FE students preparing for next steps in to HE or employment was jointly led by a member of the research team and an artist facilitator. This approach enabled participants to draw on a broader range of resources to explore, represent and illustrate their experiences of preparing for transition and to participate actively and collectively in the production of a multi-modal record of the session.

In this paper we mine our mass of material to identify encounters between individual and institutional habitus as transition narratives are played out within the FE context. We begin with a discussion of students’ projections of their own habitus and then explore their characterisations of the institutional habitus that frames their encounters with their programmes of study and patterns their concept making about HE and the idea of transition.

***Thinking with Habitus***

Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘field’ and‘ habitus’ are useful ways of exploring how students’ expectations and experiences of and choices about HE might be contextualised by exposure to wider social and cultural discourses around education and learning as well as more particular, immediate personal experiences of learning and education. A Bourdieusian field constitutes:

…a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or with value…(Bourdieu, in Wacquant, 1989:44)

Bourdieusian fields often embody rules or taken-for-granted practices that are imposed (without necessarily being explicitly identified) on those who seek to enter or remain within them. They therefore structure social and professional practices by defining the range of possible and acceptable actions and behaviours available to those operating within any given field (Grenfell, 2004). Bourdieu (1984) argues that the artifice of social practices then become invisible because they are, ‘obscured by the realities of ordinary sense-experience’ (ibid 22). In relation to this project for example, an student’s identification with a particular type of academic higher education institution may be reinforced or marginalised by their own, or their family or community’s previous experiences of learning and membership of educational institutions and networks.

Such personal learning experiences and identification with different educational communities are constituting of what Bourdieu calls ‘habitus’ (1985) the collection of ways of being, doing, thinking and acting that comprise our ‘social inheritance’ (Grenfell and James, 1998:16). For Reay Habitus is both inward and outward facing,

“a person's individual history is constitutive of habitus, but so also is the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of” (Reay, 2004: 434)

and manifests as a “complex interplay between past and present” that is not only thought but embodied, as present in how we move and hold ourselves, as it is in the ideas we express about our commitments and our ‘people like us’ affiliations. However Habitus is for Bourdieu more than simply a reproducing impulse as Reay explains:

“While it is important to view individuals as actively engaged in creating their social worlds, Bourdieu's method emphasizes the way in which `the structure of those worlds is already predefined by broader racial, gender and class relations' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 144). Habitus, then, is a means of viewing structure as occurring within small-scale interactions and activity within large-scale settings. (Reay, 2004, 439)

As such Habitus might be described as a ‘system of dispositions’. These dispositions emerge out of participation in and exposure to wider social settings and discursive environments. They are moreover, characterised by a “…vagueness...the more-or-less, which define(s) one’s ordinary relation to the world. (Bourdieu1990: 54). Within Bourdieu’s theory of dispositions, there are potentially limitless individual “…possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions…”(1990: 54)

Reay’s (2004) nuanced take on habitus suggests that it can function to exclude some practices as unthinkable, whilst predisposing individuals towards other ‘certain, predictable ways of behaving’ (2004: 432) producing “…an internalised framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable.” (2004: 434) Crucially for this discussion Habitus provides us with a way in to theorising individual responses to, and choices about, HE transition that are not ‘free’ but expressive of habitus as a “complex, internalized core from which everyday experiences emanate” (Reay, 2004: 435). Through her work on prison education Wilson provides a nuanced account of the way habitus orientates an individual towards a particular ‘world view’ about education, which she calls ‘educentricity’. For Wilson educentricity captures,

the way in which certain groups or individuals position education within the parameters of their own personal and professional experiences which then go on to influence the opinions, perceptions and understandings of the education of others – who are of course doing the same thing! From this position each group or person compares and contrasts, judges and assesses the position and meaning of education in other worlds, using their own experience as a yardstick by which to measure others. (Wilson 2007: 192)

Thinking with educentricity enables an exploration of how habitus plays out more precisely within the contexts of education by illuminating the ways in which prior experience can impact on perceptions of and decisions about HE transition as well as the ways in which educational contexts work to constitute educentricities through (re)production of institutional habitus (Reay, David and Ball 2001). Reay et al define institutional habitus as “the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual’s behaviour as it is mediated through an organization” (Reay et al., 2001:127) drawing attention to the idea that “organisations, like individuals, internalise the social world and form powerful dispositions which are shared by those working within the organization” (Walker 2015:52). Institutional habitus are, moreover, linked and indexed to wider socio-economic and geographical/demographic communities and discourses through schools/colleges shape and inform their pupil/student communities (Reay 1998). It is important to note that the concept of institutional habitus is not uncontested and critics such as (Atkinson 2011, Walker, 2015) draw attention to institutions as sites of discursive dissonance as well convergence, however for the purposes of this paper we use the idea not as a totalizing narrative but as a way of opening up to exploration the institutional locus as a structuring site for the organization of discourse that impacts significantly on students’ concept making and thus their educentricities.

Crucially the nature of interactions between educentricity and institutional habitus can have tangible, material affect with research indicating that students from non-traditional backgrounds often find transition from FE to HE difficult due to worries about money, the need to work, fear of failure and uncertainty about if they will fit in (Hutchings & Archer, 2001; Reay et al, 2001, Reay et al 2009). For these students HE can often be experienced as a hostile environment which uses unfamiliar language, requiring disorientating practices informed by tacit expectations that many students find bewildering and alien (Askham, 2008). McGivney’s (2003) work on non-traditional students’ experience of academic writing draws attention to what she calls the ‘mystique of unfamiliarity and remoteness’ non-traditional students experience as they encounter a new social world (institutional habitus) of which they are not a product causing them to feel to borrow Bourdieu’s words not like ‘fish in water’ but instead to feel the weight of the water around them (Bourdieu in interview with Wacquant in Bourdieu, 1989:43).

For this reason there is evidence to suggest that non-traditional students often choose universities on the basis of feeling that feel they might fit in better and/or experience what Goodenow (1993) has termed ‘belongingness’, a key factor in educational achievement. Belongingness refers to the varied networks of family and friends that non-traditional students remain part of, and draw on, during their time at a local university as in contrast to the experiences of students who move away from home and live independently (and who, more often than not, can rely on financial support from their parents). In comparison, Leese (2010) researching non-traditional students in a post- 1992 university found that up to 70% of her participants had to balance heavy work commitments with full-time study. Therefore they spent relatively little time on campus beyond the absolutely necessary, prioritising face-to-face contact with lecturers over non-essential campus based social activity. The ability to balance paid work influenced HE choice with proximity between work and university for example became a key factor in decision-making.

***‘Transition’***

Thinking with field, habitus and educentricity helps us to understand that Transition is a complex phenomena that might be more helpfully described as a spectrum of experiences that play out differently for different students joining different institutions. As such it is a highly contested idea (Gale and Parker, 2012). What researchers do agree on however is that flexible and responsive strategies where ‘exporting’ and ‘importing’ institutions work collaboratively to support transition are likely to be most effective (Knox, 2005, Leese, 2010). Crucially, it is argued, transition models need to challenge the kinds of deficit models or ‘derogatory discourses’ (Burke, 2009; French, 2013) that often inform discussions around non-traditional students’ transition by contextualising some of the ways in which choice about HE institution and programme are influenced and framed by wider considerations and discourses. This re-conceptualisation of transition requires it to be reinterpreted as the means by which first year undergraduates negotiate the ‘local spaces’ within which they operate as learners and how they exercise ‘choices’ around their learning in the knowledge economy of HE (Ball, 1998; Lingard, 2000).

Gale and Parker (2012) argue that this requires discussions about transition to more thoroughly theorise through connection “to wider analyses of occupational and social mobility”.They offer a typology that identifies and describes three modes of transition that map to wider paradigms of meaning making and taking and make use of contrasting ontologies and epistemologies: transition as *induction*; transition as *development*; and transition as *becoming*. Each corresponds to a different mode of transitional change, respectively: *inculcation* is linear, sequentially organised over defined periods and draws on metaphors of pathways and journeying; *transformation* works with an understanding of individual life phase and works accumulatively enabling the student to navigate socio-cultural norms and transform from one identity to another; the final paradigm, *becoming*, operates with a post-modern notion of *fluctuation* rejecting the organising principles of linearity, accumulation and transformation in favour of “perpetual, fragmented, movement” that draws on the metaphor of the rhizome. (Gale and Parker 2012:5). Worked through, each paradigm enacts different implications for the values, attitudes, behaviours and identities of students, teachers and institutions with *induction* and *development* focusing on structures and “attention on different students, on their difference” whilst the priority in a *becoming* paradigm might be “the changes to be made by institutions and systems in order to accommodate difference” (ibid). In this way Gale and Parker encourage a recalibration of the transition debate away from students, their differences and ‘moments’ of transition towards transition as a “condition of our subjectivity” (ibid) that institutions need to pay constant attention to by: creating collaborative and inclusive learning spaces; enabling students to ground their learning in something important to them; connecting to students lives; and being culturally aware (ibid).

Whilst Gale and Parker’s work sets an agenda for new institutional practice what this means at the level of local, micro interactions, in particular for teachers and their work, (roles and identities), remains under-theorised. Connecting Zukas and Malcolms’ (1999) typology of teacher identities (and in turn student identities) provides a starting point for these discussions, with ‘psycho-diagnostician’ and ‘critical practitioner’ mapping usefully on to induction and development modes. Starting points for imagining the rhizo-teacher are less well developed and our analysis below contributes to this discussion.

***Reading micro interactions***

In this next section of the paper we work with our analysis of FE students’ talk about ‘confidence’ and ‘risk’ to explore micro interactions about transition. These moments are significant for the purposes of this paper because they draw attention to points in our material where we encountered most tension and contradiction as the apparently resilient, resourceful ‘juggling’ identities that students brought to their transition experience were back-grounded and diminished by their encounters with institutional habitus. Institutional habitus manifests through a notion of ‘readiness’ and what we want to draw attention to here is the striking role that teachers play as projectors, protectors and perpetuators of institutional habitus.

***Confidence***

It is important to begin this account of our reading/s of the empirical material with an acknowledgement of the sense of optimism about transition that participants tended to bring to their discussions and contributions. When asked to rate their confidence levels about moving from further to HE 84% of respondents suggested they felt at least quite confident with 16% feeling very confident. HE students looking back recalled similar feelings with 85% recalling that they had felt quite confident and 21% claiming to have felt very confident. This is not to diminish or background the concerns of the significant minority, 15% in each case, who reported feeling not at all confident but to emphasise the hopeful resilience that we encountered time and time again through the experience of undertaking this study and to set our discussion in opposition to stereotypes of the non-traditional student that characterise them as ‘needy’, ‘less confident’ or more likely to ‘fail.’ Rather we draw on our evidence base to illuminate the substantial identity work undertaken by our participants, *in addition to* the practical juggling of multiple roles (student, carer, worker) as they orientate and grapple with the structural relations and social and cultural complexity of ‘becoming a student.’ This ‘third shift’, beyond personal responsibilities and study, represents an additional burden of social and psychological endeavour that ‘middle class’ students, whose siblings and parents have degrees (Bradley et al 2015) and who are following what Bradley et al (2015) call the ‘taken for granted pathway’ in to HE, are spared. However few of the participants in this study seemed to have any near to hand meta-thinking tools to help them identify, describe or characterise this ‘third shift’ work. Instead what they ‘took for granted’ was an entirely personal, individualised responsibility for success or failure independent of any social, political or cultural narrative of situatedness within structural relations. As such their identity work, although sometimes substantially burdensome is not taken up or recognised as an ‘asset’ or ‘resource’ by either students or teachers and as such is not put to work tactically or strategically in support of achieving successful transition . or as a counter to the narratives of deficit that we see emerge in institutional habitus about their ‘readiness’ for HE.

***Managing complexity***

It was clear from the data that for many participants ‘being a student’ is one aspect of a complex load of personal responsibilities and priorities. Many participants, 47%, reported that they worked part-time in addition to their studies. Time spent in paid work varied significantly with for example 8% of these working in excess of 20 hours per week, 13% working 11-15 hours and 13% working 6-10 hours per week. Time spent in work also varied considerably between the three groups of students (FE, HE in FE, HE). As table 1 shows students following FE and HE programmes in college were more likely to work part-time than their university counterparts and were significantly more likely to work longer hours, over 40% of HE in FE students reported working in excess of 16 hours a week, compared with 23% of FE students and 13% of University students with a staggering 30% undertaking in excess of 20 hours of paid work per week in addition to their course of study.

A significant number of respondents also had caring responsibilities with 34% reporting that they cared for a child/ren and 6.5% for an adult/s. Those identifying as carers of adults were also more likely to also have a part-time job than non-carers or carers with children. Those who identified as carers were generally older than those who did not, however it was notable that just under 44% of those who reported caring for an adult were in the 20-25 age range.

Although our data bears out Hutchings and Archer’s (2001) and Reay et al’s (2008, 2009) assertion that non-traditional students transition experience is characterised by difficult choices and conflicting responsibilities, as one participant shared “*I actually split up with my boyfriend to come and do this...”,* participants presented themselves as competent and adept negotiators and time managers, accepting complexity and the necessity of learning to ‘juggle’ efficiently as an inevitable, sometimes difficult, aspect of their everyday experience as students who needed to work or care as well as study.

*It’s [*attending FE college*] like putting a different head on it, my learning head hopefully...If I’ve got to pick the kids up from school and I’ve got an hour or so before I’ve got to pick them up...it’s a different head and you just switch between it...*

However FE participants’ narratives suggest that the complexities of their lives and the capacities they developed in response did not always find recognition within the frame of institutional habitus as it surfaces through interactions with their tutors:

*Tutors do not appreciate the step we have made*

*Teachers in college, they sometimes forget that we have a life outside college. We all have jobs to do and we’ve got families and they just see it as coursework full stop and they don’t see the bigger picture.*

*Yeah, they don’t see that sometimes you might actually go and do family stuff rather than sitting and doing coursework 24/7.*

*Sometimes the tutors will be like ‘well you know you need to put your coursework first’, but no, if you’re living on your own...*

Working with the artist to explore metaphorical representations of these tensions produced a rather startling account of what was at stake for students with commitments to college weighing heavily and singularly against more fundamental needs as this focus extract from the focus group illustrates:

*We need scales!*

*On one side you can have coursework, so loads of paper, and then on the other a house...*

*...and money*

*...yeah, and money*

*And a heart*

*Artist: Why a heart?*

*Because that represents family and friends...people that you love.*

However these responses also drew out ‘educentric’ assumptions about participants’ self-perceived other-ness to a projected idea of the ‘proper student’, “*because you’ve got more responsibilities you can’t be a proper student*” with the proper student being free to prioritise their studies above other commitments and dedicate time, energy and focus. This notion of the ‘correct’ way to be a student was not just confined to time and activity management but also manifested, through the idea of ‘ready-ness’, which was seen to be a feature of academic aptitude/capability.

***Risk and ‘Ready-ness’***

The need to be diagnostic, flexible and adaptable in order to succeed were taken for granted ways of *being* (or habitus as discussed above) that FE students were unselfconscious, non-congratulatory and matter of fact about, hence their surprise at what they saw as the realities of their lives not always being recognised or valued, *“sometimes college forget that we have a life outside college, they see it as just being about coursework*” or “*if I don’t work, I don’t eat”*, within the prevailing habitus of the institutional environment. And interestingly it is the teacher, “they” as agent (of ‘college’) who is implicated as (re)producer of this viewpoint.

As such, many students felt the ‘risk’ of pursuing their studies very keenly, “*you’re taking a risk*”, “*you’re betting aren’t you…literally it is a gamble*”, “*if you have children think very carefully*.” It was such moments of dislocation in the narratives that animated the most fervent accounts of struggle beyond the more tangible (physical, practical, emotional) labour of juggling per se as one HE student remarked in retrospect “*my college made it sound impossible like I wasn’t ready, which made me scared. I’ve fitted in [*at university*] quite well*.” Once again the choice of the term ‘college’ to infer a personal message about individual performance is an interesting one, whilst evoking the pervasive nature of institutional habitus, it simultaneously takes for granted the tutor as message carrier.

Ideas about ‘ready-ness’ surfaced an educentric perspective on HE identities that worked to background capability (managing complexity for example) and foreground a deficit discourse. We noticed that references to ideas about, and discussions of, ‘readiness’ permeate participants’ narratives, with ‘readiness’ a proxy marker, a sort of ‘identity tipping point’, signalling that the student is primed and poised for successful transition. ‘Readiness’ seemed to represent an idealised point of complicity or coming together of institutional habitus and educentricity, but it is simultaneously a site of antagonism, prompting feelings of lack and deep felt anxiety “*you need to know that you’re ready*”, “*they think you’re ready but what if you’re not ready?*” For these participants ‘readiness’ although an apparently fixed, and crucially desirable, point, a ‘something’ tangible that one needed to become, remained entirely opaque and elusive, a something ill-defined, externalised and endowed rather than a way of being they might choose to take up or take ownership of (or not).

With FE participants’ educentricities often developed outside first hand experiences of HE the risk of falling short of ‘ready-ness’ for university life has significant implications. Ball (2003) and Lingard (2005) argue that a lack of proximity to HE knowledge economies impedes the non-traditional student’s access to limitless ‘choice’ about their higher education entry options. As such these FE students feel that the pressure of making a ‘correct’ choice of university course is both unavoidable because the decision they are confronted with is entirely a binary one (right or wrong) and solely their responsibility and that, as such, they singularly ‘owned’ the risk:

*It’s the risk of, if you do it and you only do it for half a year, and here you don’t have to pay nothing, but there you lose out on nine thousand pounds...that’s why I’m leaving a gap, to make sure...there’s no way of doing a trial thing either.*

*I am nervous about it because everyone says it’s going to be different*

*Pressure*

What is absent from participants’ reckonings is a counter narrative offering any kind of alternative to the fixed, apparently pre-determined dilemmas, they must wrestle with as some form of necessary ‘rite of passage’. As such we see that Institutional habitus works, through the micro-interactions between teachers and students to naturalise the grammar of a limiting paradigm, in which transition is mono-dimensional, individualised one-off, high stakes and consequently immensely high risk.

**Teachers and *Becoming* Transitions**

This small selection of extracts from our empirical material simultaneously implicates teachers in the work of institutional habitus in patterning and framing educentricities and opens up opportunities for thinking reflexively about the role teachers (in FE particularly but, following a rhizomic logic, in HE too) might play in a *becoming* or ‘rhizo’ paradigm of transition. Gale and Parker (2012) offer a summary of the everyday dynamics of rhizo-transitions within which students become the subjects rather than objects of a transition experience without end: “flexible student modes; the removal of the distinction between full and part time; flexible student pathways including opportunities to change course, withdraw and return to study through life; and a curriculum that reflects and affirms marginalised histories and subjectivities” (2012:5). Within this dynamic student as subject becomes “fluid… ambivalent and polyvalent, open to change, continually being made, unmade and remade” (Tuhiwai Smith 2006, 52) and educentricity and institutional habitus become objects of study that rather than closing down meaning making and taking act as points of departure for life-course reflexivity about learning following the rhizomic impulse of Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘and…and…and…’ conjunction (2000).

But what might this mean for the practice of teachers? The roles, identities and practices of teachers are of course implicated in this re-imagining and we begin to see the work of the teacher not to teach for appropriation and assimilation but to “problematise, grapple,

defamiliarise, unsettle and undo – to enable students to work with/in the ruins

towards new possibilities” (Kendall et al 2016). This might mean giving up claims to expert identities, that can often be complicit with institutional habitus and work to ‘other’ students’ educentricities, and embracing collaborative identity work. This could mean adopting a more nomadic mode of co-production that shares affinities with Neary’s notion of student as producer of transition knowledge:

“*Student as Producer emphasises the role of the student as collaborators in the production of knowledge. The capacity for Student as Producer is grounded in the human attributes of creativity and desire, so that students can recognise themselves in a world of their own design*.” (Neary 2010)

**Towards Concluding**

These discussions have far reaching implications for practice

For teacher development this will mean encouraging and enabling teachers to become co-researchers of the transition experiences of their students to build local, professional knowledge about what makes transition successful in their context. In particular teachers should be explicitly aware of the ‘third shift’ work that many non traditional learners undertake, the life-world complexity that they manage and sensitive to the fact that they may not be experiencing university in same way as students who have moved away to study and don’t have additional responsibilities to juggle. Teachers should also be thoughtful and reflective about how they conceptualise and project meanings about FE, HE and transition and the kinds of definitions that they work with (consciously or unconsciously) in their classrooms to ensure that they open up new spaces and places for non-traditional students to re-shape, re-make and take ownership of what it (could or should) means to be a student in higher education.

For ‘the student’ this meta-awareness of the ‘becoming’ nature of higher education involves lecturers acknowledging that transition from FE to HE will initiate changing conceptions of individuals’ identity as a learner and student alongside other identities that make up their habitus. Moreover, these changing conceptions may involve uncertainty and adaptation as students ‘live out’ their transition from FE and HE, not only in terms of how they see themselves, but how others, such as family and friends may see them.

For everyone in the community this means moving from nouns to verbs and accepting that there is no such thing as ‘*the* student’ but only ‘*studenting*’ - the multiple present continuous, always already, ‘and…and…and’ grammar, of experiencing life in higher education as deeply social, cultural, material and fluid. Moving beyond ‘the student’ (the ‘post student’?) will enable a move beyond the old and unhelpful binaries of traditional and non-traditional towards more nuanced, sophisticated models that embrace, celebrate and respond more effectively to the ever-divergent needs of a diverse student body.

For Institutional planning and strategy this will mean taking careful account of the ‘third shift’ work that students undertake in relation to transition and providing, by default, wraparound structures, processes and support mechanisms that scaffold and enable students to manage this additional load effectively.

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