Second chance learning and the contexts of teaching: a study of the learning experiences of further education students with few qualifications.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the learning experience of a group of students in a further education college. This group, mainly adult returners, (there was a small cohort of school leavers) with few academic qualifications, succeeded in gaining Higher National awards and some went on to complete a degree.

Students from 1995-2002 on one course in a college of further education were surveyed and interviewed. Findings from 95 questionnaires and 60 interviews on what factors they considered important to their success, how they learned best, and what elements of the learning experience were important to them, were all used to examine the learning of this group of students, both with Highers and without Highers, adult returners and school leavers, with a view to designing a teaching model for both sets of students. The initial hypothesis that those without Higher qualifications required something radically different from those with Highers, was disproved. Three case studies were used to give a more chronological and holistic picture of the student experience.

The study shows that discussion, group communal learning and the trust and reciprocity exhibited within the dynamics of this particular FE classroom contributed to the efficacy of the learning experiences. Concepts of learner identity, discourse, student and teacher identities and pedagogical traditions were explored in the light of the data. Social capital was used as a heuristic device to examine the mechanics of classroom activity, the bonding of the group and how the small world of an FE classroom related to the larger networks of the workplace, the community and higher education.

The final outcome, the model, was presented as a broad set of principles based on the students' comments, the teacher/researcher's experience and education theories. It was to be "learning focused" rather than "training focused" (Eraut et al. 2000: 240). Relationships between staff and students, students and students, modes of thinking linked to critical discourse and collaborative activity were the key factors in their successful achievement. The workplace context and the use of the practical setting were seen as important in making the learning link to "real life" but were not seen as the pivotal force. This combination of social and cognitive forces was translated into a

model. The principles contained in the model were an expression of the way the students changed in their thinking, and in themselves, and what classroom dynamics brought these changes about.

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CHAPTER 1
RATIONALE

Introduction

This is a study about second chance learning; it examines how students, previously deemed as failures in an educational context, having received few or no paper qualifications, gained success at a further education college. Many factors determined their success, from individual life circumstances to generalisable elements concerning teaching and learning. The thesis will examine the relationship between learning communities and academic success. The study has its roots in the observation that some of the students who achieved college awards at Higher National level had few or no previous qualifications. Contrary to expectations, this non-certificated group responded to ways of thinking and learning usually associated with more traditional academic institutions and some went on to gain a degree. It is an attempt to understand how this group of learners experienced learning that went beyond the vocational, competency based training. The students who had left school at 16 and returned to college learned how to think critically. Experiences, both inside and outside college, contributed to their learning.

This study will investigate how this learning journey enabled some of them to gain access to a degree programme. Lifelong learning is a concept which describes what learning is, when it takes place and how to assess it. Alongside broad and sometimes amorphous ideals of inclusion and lifelong learning, there remains an economic imperative to supply the market with appropriately educated people. Aspects of social inclusion and access can challenge traditional methods of teaching and can also question who has knowledge and how it is legitimated. Standards and more traditional formally accredited qualifications are seen as the domain of schools, colleges and universities. Further education colleges are under pressure to provide access to post-16 learning and to maintain traditional standards. To understand the conflict between access for all and maintaining standards this study examines students over an 8 year period who have failed to gain Higher qualifications at school but who have used other means and methods of experience outside of the school experience to access knowledge. Studies of those people with few qualifications ("school failures") such as Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977: 98) where he examines how working class kids end up in working

class jobs, endorse the reproduction of labour through education. One of the pupils in Willis' study, Joey, says:

> …other people, say like the ear'oles, they'm getting their exams, they'm working, having no social life, having no fun, and they're waiting for 15 years time when they're people, when they've got married and things like that. I think that's the difference. We are thinking about now, and having a laff now…
> Spanksy: I ain't got no ambitions, I don't wanna have …I just want to have a nice wage, that'd just see me through.

My study uses Willis's image of the young people who traditionally followed each other through the factory doors, and examines how people with similar circumstances and academic backgrounds broke away from that tradition to return to college to gain a qualification. Studying the underdog has a strong tradition in sociology: in contrast, this is a study of achievers. Their journey through their course, what made them re-evaluate themselves as successful, how the experience of studying was different from school, and why they succeeded, are the concerns here.

Over ten years of teaching in further education, I have observed that many of the students who came to class with few or no qualifications from school were perceptive and appeared as active thinkers, engaged in intellectual reflection. They were the type of student / pupil who would have been described as "bright – will go far" in a secondary school setting (where I had previously taught for more than twenty years). What had happened? How was it that these students had missed out on school qualifications but ended up on a fairly intellectually demanding course (in their terms and in further education terms) in a further education college in the west of Scotland? This study is partly about how they got there but it is primarily concerned with what made them stay. With their academic track record, at the first mention of an essay, why didn't they pack their bags and walk out? How did the second chance experience give them an opportunity to succeed? What did further education give this group that school had not?

Course of study

The students came to college to do a Higher National Certificate or Diploma in Supporting Learning Needs (this will be abbreviated to HNSLN in the study). [1] The entry requirements are two Highers (one of which must be English) or relevant experience. The aim of the course is to train students to support learning with people who had additional learning needs of varying degrees either in schools or in the community.

There was a two day placement in a school or adult service centre and approximately three days were spent in college. It is interesting that those who had had a poor experience at school chose to study on a course that had school or adult learning placements. The ratio of males to females on the course was approximately 1:10 although the interview cohort had a different ratio of 1:8.

Qualifications

One of the primary decisions for the research was how to define the students who were the central players in the study. The students' definitions of themselves were often that they had no Highers so it was decided that since this comment cropped up so many times in class, then this must be germane to their definition of themselves and, probably, of themselves as learners. This definition often went hand in hand with a comment on their poor performance at school. The study is interested in how students with no Highers gained HN awards. Of the 60 students who were interviewed, 24 went on to gain degrees. Of this 24, nine had no Highers and one had no qualifications at all.

There was a wide range of qualifications as some had no O grades, some had no Standard Grades and some left school with a few Standard Grades; the difficulty lay in where to draw the line: there is perhaps a small difference between someone who left school at 16 with no Highers and someone who left school at 17 with one Higher. In this study, where the term "few qualifications" (as in the title) is used, it means those who

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[1] The title of this course is, strictly speaking, for HND year 1 only. Students from HND year 2 were also included in this study; the second year of the course had a different title – HND in Supporting and Managing Learning Needs. To simplify, the term HNSLN has been used throughout this thesis.

left school at 16 with no Highers. It could be debated that the entire cohort had "few qualifications" in relation to the qualifications required for university entrance. None had the standard five Highers required for Scottish university entrance. It is important to recognise that this definition of "qualified" has some anomalies. Two Highers was an entry requirement set by the college for those who had no experience working in the area of supporting people with additional learning needs. This level of qualification had some legitimacy in that it was seen as the student having studied and reached a certain standard of education and it shows a breadth of study. It was decided that for the purposes of the study, any Higher would be considered to be "having qualifications" and that, although this may appear a false divide in some ways, it was an indication that they had stayed on at school past the leaving age and had attempted some higher academic study in school contexts. They had been given the choice to stay on at school; this validation by the school that they were "worthy" of this level of study may have had an influence on the learner identity of students who came to college.

The classification of Highers / Non-Highers was a departure from most studies in participation in further education. The National Institute for Adults in Continuing Education which commissions many participation studies of lifelong learning, uses the classification of school leavers (16 plus) and adult returners (those over 20) (McGivney 1990, 1996). The college used the term *mature students* for those students over 25. In this study I have used the NIACE classification of adult returners as those people over 20. Broadly speaking, school leavers are those who come to college from school, either before or after taking their Highers. (Highers are the exams that Scottish students take after Standard Grades.) An adult returner is someone who has left school, usually before taking Highers and has had some experience of work or parenting.

Participation studies provide quantitative data to inform policy makers about the "who, what and when" aspects of lifelong learning. Some studies also examine more qualitative issues of different learning approaches and different academic profiles between the two groups (McGivney 1993, 1999; Gallagher et al. 2000).

Instead of using the adult returners and school leavers classification, the cohort in my study was selected by qualifications gained. Approximately half of the students in our college are mature students (for 2002/3 the enrolment figures showed that almost 50% of

the students were over 25). This distinction was also remarked on by the students, often by mature returners who felt that they would appear less academically confident than the younger students. Although the age difference was visible and the life experience difference surfaced in class discussions, it was the difference in the underlying learner identity (possibly dependent on the numbers of Highers they had) which seemed to be the main factor for this study. The students who came on the HNSLN course tended to see academic legitimacy in terms of Highers. There needed to be a redefinition of the student group profile and since I was interested in examining the success of those who had not gained advanced qualifications at school, the criterion for difference became the number of Highers the students had.

The adult returner / school leaver classification is still a useful one in identifying differences in experience and learning needs and these terms are used in the interpretation of the data where age and experience were more meaningful than lack of qualifications. There was also a correspondence between this classification and qualifications: broadly speaking, the mature returners were represented by those with no Highers and the school leavers were represented by those with Highers. (Of the survey respondents, 46 out of the 54 students with no Highers were adult returners and of the 41 students with Highers, 23 were school leavers.) Age and life experience appeared to be potent factors of learner identity. Age is only one of a number of factors which determine a "disposition to learn" and participation studies use the categories of adult returner and school leaver (that is, at what age they come to college) as it is probably easier to conduct large scale quantitative studies using this easily accessed data. Age is an easier question to answer and record than a more qualitative question on attitudes to learning. At times there appears to be little difference between the Highers / Non-Highers classification and the returners and leavers. The Highers / Non-Highers category fitted the main thrust of the research, which was to examine the experience of those students with few qualifications who were under-represented in lifelong learning. However, the end product was to produce a model for learning and so both groups were to be considered.

Research Questions

The main research question was: *What made second chance learning a success*? The answer appeared to lie within the difference between those with qualifications (Highers

in this case) and those without. So the next research question was: *Is there a difference between the two groups in the way they experience learning?* The first part of the study compares the two sets of students' priorities for success. It will compare the learning experience in college of those who left school at 16 with no Highers and those who took a more traditional route by staying on at school and then coming to college with one or more Highers. 95 students answered questionnaires about their priorities for success and how the school experience differed from that at college. This is not a comparative study of school and further education, though comparisons will be made.

The next question to ask was: *What elements of the learning experience are important?* The third question concentrates on the students with no Highers. 35 students were interviewed on various aspects of the learning experience.

The final part is the pragmatic section of the study and seeks to answer the question: *How can this information about both groups of students be used to design a teaching and learning model?* 25 students with Highers were interviewed to gain an understanding of their learning experiences.

The questionnaire and interview questions were based on a set of assumptions:
we have a "new set" of learners – second chance learners;
they may have a different set of requirements for learning than certificated students (with Highers);
the students know what they find useful for learning;
a new model of learning is required to teach them.

The research issues are:

> *the nature of the difference (if any) between those students entering college with Highers and those without:*
> *the relationship between teaching and learning and the students' performance;*
> *their definition of themselves as learners and its relationship to their success;*
> *the relationship between the learning community and their individual outcomes;*
> *and finally, the implications for staff development training in FE, assuming that elements of the educational experience can be generalised into a teaching model.*

The main research issue, the nature and quality of the learning experience, springs from two quotations from Bruner which had informed my teaching. This investigation was a partial testing out of these aspects of his theories. The first is concerned with intellectual inquiry using metaphor. It connects the use of language to affective and cognitive processes. It acknowledges the importance of intuition, "mindful (but not intellectual) immersion in experience" (Claxton 1996: 49) and the sensory unconscious that provide us with insights which Bruner calls "hunches":

> …hunches, combinatorial products of his metaphoric activity. *If he is not fearful of these products of his own subjectivity,* he will go so far as to tame the metaphors that have produced the hunches, tame them in the sense of shifting them from the left hand to the right hand by rendering them into notions that can be tested. (Bruner 1979: 4) My italics.

The second is a recognition of the learning group as a cultural community.

> … most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture. It is not just that the (child) must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture. (Bruner 1986: 127)

These quotations from Bruner's writings gave rise to three ideas:

learning is both individual and communal;

it is an emotional response, a cognitive process and a social activity;

understanding of learning can be found in individual stories and can also be constructed as a metanarrative.

The first two form the substance of the study which is about learning. The third underpins the methodology in how we can reach a (partial) understanding of this learning. The stories of the students' experiences and the metaphors they used were an expression of cognitive, social and emotional connections. Close examination of these narratives and the language therein may be as close as we can get to understanding such an idiosyncratic, elusive and often invisible, process as learning.

Rationale

Educational research has certain requirements: it shares with other discipline based research a necessity to be rigorous, methodologically sound (generalisable in a social science paradigm) and useful. This study meets these requirements in that it uses mainly qualitative methods to throw light on the experience of how some students experience learning and develop in their thinking; it shows how this can be applied generally within a world of lifelong learning; it offers a rich and in-depth account of the process of learning and the place of language and cognition within that learning; and finally, it constructs a model for teaching these learners in an effective way. Recommendations for staff development and training contribute to its usefulness.

It questions the assumptions about suitability for training, namely, that employers tend to send the most qualified employees on more training (Houston, Gasteen and Davidson 2002). It also questions whether the most suitable educational route for gaining a degree is the traditional one of post-Highers entry from school. The OECD figure for 2002 for adult participation in education reinforced previous findings (OECD 1997) that it is still true that those with the most education are more likely to participate in further education.

> Initial education and continuing education and training are mutually reinforcing, and (that) education combines with other factors to make adult training least common among those who need it most. (OECD 2002: 248)

In simpler terms, the less training you have, the less you are likely to get. One of the main premises of this study is that previously unqualified students can develop into successful learners. It questions assumptions about who is most suitable and receptive to further education. To respond to the requirements of the market place and to create a learning society, Coffield says:

> A learning society is one in which all citizens acquire high general education, appropriate vocational training and a job … while continuing to participate in education and training throughout their lives … Citizens of a learning society would … be able to engage in critical dialogue and action to improve the quality of life for the whole

community. In other words, they are lifelong learners with reasonable judgement and good thinking skills who use these faculties in their everyday lives. (Coffield 1994: 1)

Lifelong learning and social capital

The Kennedy Report, *Learning Works: widening participation in further education* concluded:

> Further education has a unique contribution to make to widening participation in post-16 learning and the creation of a self-perpetuating learning society. (Kennedy 1997: 25)

Fryer (1997:373) reiterated this: "If lifelong learning is to become a reality, FE will lie at its heart".

The Fryer Report, *Learning for the Twenty-first Century*, (1997) and the DFEE Green Paper (*The Learning Age* 1998) both emphasise the role of the further education college in fulfilling national (both UK wide and as specifically stated in the Scottish Green Paper *Opportunity for Everyone* 1999: 19) objectives for lifelong learning.

> Learning is central to economic success and social cohesion …All those who are not fulfilling their potential or who have underachieved in the past must be drawn into successful learning. (Kennedy 1997: 15)

This thesis examines those students who are stated in both the Kennedy and Fryer reports as belonging to groups under-represented in further and higher education. Most of the students that inform the main part of my study could be classified as within the group of "people without qualifications, lone parents and low income women" (Fryer 1997: 16 and Kennedy 1997: 2). It attempts to answer the question, "How does what happens in the classroom affect the students?" We know that students who have "underachieved in the past" (Kennedy 1997: 15) are likely to bring that legacy of failure into the college. This thesis looks at the students' views of the attempts to overcome that debilitating factor and "draw" them into a learning network.

It relates to a social landscape in that values, attitudes and habits formed through learning are likely to have a positive effect on civic participation (Office for National

Statistics 2001). The more qualified you are and the more learning that occurs results in a higher degree of activity in social networks. The Performance and Innovation Unit (2002: 21) discuss the "strong positive association between levels of social capital, community engagement and social trust and levels of educational attainment". Social capital is defined as:

> … features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable the participants to act together more efficiently to pursue shared objectives … Social capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant trust. (Putnam cited in Field 2003: 32)

Putnam says that education is the key to the creation of social capital. Norms of the classroom can build up trust and reciprocity between students. Accessing networks in the links with industry through work placement are other forms of social capital. The students build up relationships with co-workers who then enculturate them into the work community. This extends their network and increases their chances of participation in a wider society.

How external support systems affect teaching and learning

This study also examines the elements that make up a successful learning community. Further education colleges stress the social and psychological aspects that contribute to "maintaining numbers". These aspects take the form of guidance, financial aid and social welfare. The students' previous educational performance is used as an indicator of the level of support they may require. This is not to denigrate the intellectual quality of the student but to remind ourselves that something different is required if the student is to succeed at his or her "second chance". Support mechanisms in further education colleges have taken on the more practical forms; these are mainly financial and divorced from the content of the classroom. Some of the funding for the college comes with a proviso that it will be spent in retaining certain social groups or those with special circumstances (eg. European Social Fund money for child care for those on particular courses). This external support framework is indeed critical for success; financial worry has a direct impact on effective learning. Although most students have to supplement their income by working, it is reasonable to assume that there is an optimal amount of external waged work they can undertake before it begins to affect their studies.

The external constraints often cited for non-participation (McGivney 1999; Berryman 1987) are of interest to this study in that some people overcome these constraints. What constitutes this group who return to college and who make a success of their second chance learning? Participation studies tell us who participates and what prevents and encourages them from entering education (McGivney 1996, 1999, 2000) but they tell us little about the quality of learning and what that learning means to these students (Field 2003).

Providing an intellectually stimulating educational environment requires different measures than dealing with structural issues such as transport, childcare and income. While acknowledging the necessity of the external support system, it is important to note that the emphasis on funding and child care often result in teaching and learning being taken for granted in our college. There is little debate about pedagogical issues and certain principles are taken as axiomatic. One of these principles is partly based on the ideas of multiple intelligence theory (Gardner 1993).

There is a potential for all types of learning to occur with all types of people, practical doers and academic thinkers. This should, ostensibly at least, free up the notion of knowledge and learning from being tied to types of activity and narrow descriptions of intelligence. What it does, is to label FE students. Returners to further education, since they are generally regarded as having "failed" at school and are enrolled on vocational courses, are considered to be practical thinkers, "doers", who are often high in emotional intelligence and social skills. Rather than liberating students from the confining definition of intelligence being a one-dimensional, finite quality, this assessment of vocational students can be used to substantiate the divide between academic and vocational students. Practical thinkers *need* skills; academic thinkers *want* ideas. The difference in the verbs is intentional; for practical thinkers there is a sense that we, the educators, can determine their requirements whereas academic thinkers have a degree of autonomy and self-determination.

This traditional profile of the further education student often results in an attitude in the classroom that lecturers refer to as "pulling the overheads": such "dumbing down" is more than an attitude and results in certain types of teaching and learning that eschews critical thinking. Further education colleges have many structural support systems in

place and they have been found to be effective (McGivney1990) but it may be that because so much emphasis is put on these situational (Cross 1981) aspects, the discourse required to make changes in pedagogical approach in supporting cognitive development, tends to be more muted. It is easier (although no less costly perhaps) to provide child care and emergency loans than it is to redesign an educational environment.

Staff Development

As a college tutor, responsible for observing classroom practice and writing reports for the TQ(FE) course, I had experience in observing practice in almost every teaching department in the college. Although this is not used as evidence in this study, the experience in others' classrooms, in a variety of subjects, informs the teaching model. During my ten years of teaching at the college I have also been involved in teaching on staff development courses. What has often come from these courses is a consistent cry for assistance in looking at different ways of presenting material to engage the students, guidance on classroom management and a desire to talk about teaching and learning – to talk about the everyday experience and to describe the learning that goes on in each lecturer's classroom. And they want someone who may have had similar experiences to listen. Simple, simplistic even, but it begs the question why this demand is not met. If we are seriously committed to redesigning learning environments and changing the culture of teaching and learning, then pragmatic concerns of what is "officially wanted, technically possible and consensually agreed" (Biggs cited in Entwistle 1996: 112) may leave out an important factor: knowledge of what works. Increasing staff awareness of the relationship between teaching methods and learning requires that we work on what that relationship looks like: to put it simply, who knows what works and are they going to tell us? Teachers/lecturers need a model which is adaptable to different contexts, that works for particular students in a specific college on a certain course. It requires a model that accommodates the specific nature of the subject learning and the individualisation of the learning experience. The main aim of the learning experience (here I would suggest that for me, in my classroom, it is to encourage students to create their own frameworks for learning) has to be agreed upon, analysed into teachable components and then applied to each subject. It needs to be constantly under review as the profile of the subject body changes and it requires collaboration and open exchange. But first of all, it requires a model that is robust enough to stand up to critical examination, firm enough to capture the messy and slippery nature of teaching and

learning and flexible enough to adapt to changing contexts. (Of course, I have ignored the political factor of what is acceptable enough to fit into existing organisational structures. However my concern in this research is to present a workable way of increasing the value of learning experience in the classroom. Its strength lies in its efficacy for students.)

In essence, then, the thesis is concerned with three areas: the context of learning; the content of learning; and the learning community. Where the learning takes place, what type of learning it is, how it is acquired and by what process it comes to be considered learning by the students ("self-appropriated" in Rogers' [1996: 105] terms) are all questions within a more general query about the type of community which is required for, or results from, this learning. The social site of learning may be an essential part of the process. The learning community may take on a dynamic character which is determined by the learners, the subject, the teacher and the interaction between them.

It is the intent of this study to show that these second chance learners are not only capable of the more conceptual and critical forms of thinking, but that the teaching and learning techniques used in this thinking can act as support mechanisms which enhance the social and psychological experience of the student. It is based on the premise that if you teach students to develop their cognitive skills, this will have a long term effect on their learning habits. It is based on the evidence that adult returners with few to no previous qualifications gained HN qualifications, some continuing on to degrees, having made the transition from informal learning to formal and academic learning with seeming ease. How did "high school drop-outs" gain degrees? What were the factors that enabled them to make their second chance a success?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review looks at the four issues most relevant to this study:

1.   Lifelong learning, participation and social capital;

2.   Learning and discourse;

3.   Learner identity;

4.   Learning and teaching: theories.

It was necessary to situate the smaller issues of the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom within the larger context of lifelong learning to establish a sense of its importance. Participation studies contained the macro issues. In analysing the participants' comments on their experience, it was appropriate to use and explore discourse theories. The construct of learner identity was also examined in relation to the students' responses. Finally, these comments were examined in the light of existing teaching and learning theories to construct a model.

Methodology

To begin the literature review with the influences on the methodology is perhaps not a true reflection of my research process. The reading for the methodology was interwoven into the other education literature and often came about as a result of dissatisfaction with the apparent way forward. It was a response to that iterative process where, as each section unfolds, there is a realisation that the method used to examine one idea was not wholly satisfactory for the next. The methodology reading is only briefly outlined in this chapter because it is dealt with in detail in the following chapter on methodology.

The Gorard and Rees study informed the method of inquiry in this thesis. The understanding that time and stage in life had an effect on the way you constructed reality was influenced by this study of adult learners in Wales (detailed in the next section). Instead of using the "stepwise method" of accumulated variables, they took each variable independently and related it to the adults' life events – what happened at what stage in their life. "Snapshot" techniques tend to show isolated time events, not a

longitudinal overview. Gorard and Rees's method allows for the real life changes and shifts in influence as they happen. Their approach affected the collection of data in my study in that consideration was given to the stage in the students' life when decisions were made. This ranged from the important decisions (when they made up their minds to return to education) to smaller issues such as when they realised they could succeed in completing the course or could go on to the next level. There was a delay between their graduation, answering the questionnaire and giving the interview; there were changes of mind and altering of views which indicated a temporal specificity which was somewhat disconcerting for the researcher. The first time an interviewee said, "*Oh I don't know why I said/did that: that wouldn't be true now,*" it was difficult to know what to do with data that seemed to keep changing its mind.

Theories of narrative based research were read in relation to the interpretation of the data from the interviews. Although the interview questions explored the research themes and issues, they were not a satisfactory representation of the more whole and nuanced story. Hunter's *Doctor's Stories* (1991) was useful in illustrating the power of individual stories becoming medical case histories which were then used as generic models. This text was also a source for understanding the power of individual case studies and was influential in the decision to use three case studies as many parallels could be seen between medical case histories and stories from the classroom.

Finally, Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) article on the voice-centred relational method presented a way of reading the interview data which gave a multi-layered interpretation of the student's answers. These answers became stories which were rendered in individual voices. It substantiated the researcher's emphasis on the importance of letting the students speak for themselves; they chose what to elaborate on and what stories to tell.

1.1 Lifelong Learning and participation
The reading sought to determine how the smaller picture of learning in the classroom fitted into the wider issues of the lifelong learning debate. FE is the most popular form of entry into lifelong patterns of learning (Gallagher et al. 2000) so, although my research did not set out to determine whether this group of FE students became lifelong learners, it was necessary to acknowledge the connection between FE and lifelong

learning in terms of its position in educational policy. The debate around human and social capital set the context for social inclusion issues like "second chance" learning. The group comprising the main part of the study came from under-represented groups as cited in the Kennedy (1997) and Fryer (1997) reports. Participation and retention studies comprised much of the initial reading and were useful in situating the FE students within the categories of participation and to determine the legitimacy of the categories of my study, Non-Highers and those with one or more Highers. McGivney's (1996) study on participation was also used to substantiate the ten factors for success given in the questionnaire which formed the basis for the interviews.

The success of the FE students in my study was even more exceptional since they came from that group under-represented in further education (Fryer and Kennedy Reports 1997). They were mainly women with minimal qualifications, often lone parents with low income, unemployed, and they had left school at 16. They came to college with "no Highers", had negative attitudes to their school experience and had "fragile" (Gallagher 2000: 43) learner identities.

Time spent in initial education and participation in learning later on was a consistent link in much of the participation research (McGivney 1996; Gorard and Rees 2002). The more "educated" the person, the more likely they were to undertake more learning. In other words, the lifelong learner was already educated. Early education overrides all other factors (including ethnicity and gender) in educational participation (Cross 1981; Irons 2002). Financial incentives subsidised people who would have taken advantage of the learning offered anyway. The fact that the student came from a low income group did not adversely affect access to learning; it was those with poor secondary school records who found it the most difficult to access further learning. Cross's (1981) findings above were confirmed by the 1988 study done in Scotland by Munn and MacDonald. More recent surveys by NIACE (1996; 1994) confirm these findings. This set of readings confirmed that the group of students in my study was exceptional.

Participation rates examine *who, when* and *for how long* questions. They are important because retention rates are indicators of a college's success and are connected to funding. Research instruments are biased towards this type of investigation (Cross 1981). Why and how questions about successful students are left to more expansive

research. Participation studies were not helpful in determining how and why people with low qualifications succeed and what the quality of learning means to them (Field 2003). Reasons for participation are often presented as a negative – barriers to participation. My study was about success. Cross' model (1981) of categorising barriers to participation is used widely (McGivney 1990; Gorard & Rees 2002). The model consists of 3 types of barriers to participation: situational – work, family commitments too time-consuming, financial, child care and transport; institutional – rules and availability of courses and dispositional – learner's attitudes to self-perceptions that learning is irrelevant, or for children, or too difficult, and "not for the likes of me". Similar barriers to learning are acknowledged in Hillage and Aston (2001): attitudinal, physical and structural. These are lack of confidence and motivation, financial and time constraints and finally, the structures of education in teaching and training.

This small-scale study of further education students in the west of Scotland was set within a larger national picture of lifelong learning, widening access and increased citizenship. The Greenock students in my study come from an area which is heavily endowed with social inclusion priority funds, suffers from an over-investment in superstores and micro-chip assembly and has a workforce which is trying to make the transition from heavy industry into service industry. The shipyards are closed and the industrial base no longer affords a route to work. Training for new jobs (as this study is being written, call centres, which took over from micro-chip assembly are being downsized due to competition from global companies) was seen as imperative for the regeneration of this town. FE was central to this training. Many of the women students who came on the HNSLN course had worked in factories and were aware of the potential for change in employment in the social/educational/voluntary service sectors. They saw this shift in economic imperative as a chance to work with people, gain some training and education and disprove the saying, "*girls from around here don't go to college*" (mature student who had worked in a factory and lived in a social priority area of Greenock).

1.2 Human capital and social inclusion

These macro issues served as a framework for establishing why success was important and why these students chose this route to career advancement. Lifelong learning is promoted on two counts: to prepare a competent workforce and to create a more

egalitarian society. Those that participate have a better chance at integrating into society, creating networks and becoming fully involved as citizens (Field 2003). Much of the literature on participation and retention in further education centres around the tensions between human capital and social inclusion. Human capital argues that training is required for a competent workforce and social inclusion arguments call for education as a right of citizenship to improve the quality of life. They do not exclude each other but can appear, in terms of policy and ideology, as belonging to different and sometimes, opposing, camps.

For Gorard and Rees (2002) fostering lifelong learning means being able to fulfil both the economic imperative and the concern with social inclusion. The tension between these two can lead to policies which may fulfil neither objective. Gorard and Rees see the need for an explanation other than those rooted in "economistic models of market behaviour" (Gorard and Rees 2002: 30). In their study of 1104 adult learners in South Wales they found that 10% of the main sample who were interviewed in depth could be classified into eleven lifetime trajectories. Their study examined who participated, at what point in their life cycle and how their initial education related to their uptake of learning in adult life. Time and place in their life cycle were crucial factors in student participation. These ideas were used in my thesis as a basis for interview questions and as an underlying theme in the examination of "learning readiness" – how the stage of life relates to a re-thinking of learning attitudes.

People tend to choose employment which reaps reward. Human capital theory adopts this fundamental law of human endeavour and says that in the light of knowledge about market forces, people will make choices in their training and education for maximum economic gain (Gorard and Rees 2002). Participation studies are concerned with training for the market. Most of the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education surveys (McGivney 1996; Sargant and Aldridge 2003) give vocational reasons for participation and are concerned with the systemic structures that aid people to stay in education (Tett 2002); financial assistance, learning and study support, guidance and mentoring, being examples.

How does the human capital theory relate to my study? The economic imperative is a strong reason and would no doubt suffice as the main, in some cases, the only,

determinant for returning to education. If the economic drive was of primary importance then it would seem that the desire for a qualification was instrumental and that the participation in the learning experience would reflect that. The students in this study did choose to come on the HNSLN course with a view to training for the job market but they made a choice which was not determined solely by economics. Quite often they left jobs where they were earning more to train for a job they considered worthwhile. Equally, they could have got a job in this area (albeit at the lowest wage scale) without any qualifications. So, economic gain was not the sole, or even the most important, motivation for coming on the course. The question of why they had come to college could not be answered by the simple answer "to earn more money". This indicated there was a richer source of reasons why people whose learner identity was underwritten by educational failure, should revisit the site of failure. The story was far more complex than financial incentive. Once through the college doors, engaged in learning, other priorities took hold.

The lifelong learning debate affects the chapters on teaching and learning because, if FE is to "lie at the heart" (Fryer 1997: 373) of these goals for a learning society, then different approaches may need to be adopted for the diversity of the student body. Previous to the SOED (1983) *Action Plan*, lecturers in FE taught on secondary school lines with less formal relationships between staff and student. The guidelines from the SOED encouraged FE lecturers to use more active learning approaches, student-centred project work and simulated work environments. These approaches were aimed at producing a workforce which could think and act in a self-directed way, be co-operative teamworkers and have the essential communication skills. (The same people must write the reference forms I receive for the ex-students. All of these skills are requirements for every job.) Integrating college-based with work-based learning, what the Scottish Qualifications Authority terms linking theory to practice, through these student-centred approaches, was meant to create these conditions. A later report, *Six Years On*, (SOED 1990) showed that problem-solving was not "characteristic of the system" (Soden 1999: 608). Developing good thinking, an essential part of the FE remit, and implied in the descriptors of all programmes accredited by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, appears to get lost in the greater emphasis on the transmission and application of skills-based knowledge. The ambivalent attitudes to intellectual development in FE stem from the traditional divisions between academic and vocational education.

Despite these differences, the lines between HE and FE have become blurred. In 1995, one third of Scottish FE colleges had 50% of their students registered for higher education awards and over 40% of students entering higher education were doing so through colleges (Soden 1999). It may be that FE has to take on board some of the deeper learning approaches, steeped in debate and critical thinking, which are traditionally associated with the higher education sector. Similarly, there are pressures on the HE sector to use some of the adult education theories normally associated with adult returners (Zukacs and Malcolm http://www.open.ac.uk/lifelong-learning). Improving work performance and acquiring skills for doing so was a main concern of much of the research in participation in both sectors. Self-directed learning and flexibility in thinking, both attributes of the desirable graduate employee, were also seen as enabling people to be good citizens (Soden 1999). The connection between learning approaches used in HE, application through vocational relevance (the primary concern of FE) and social capital were all themes that formed a foundation for this thesis.

1.3 Lifelong Learning, social capital and citizenship

Adult learners are joiners and vice versa. (Field 2003: 38)

People connect through a series of networks and they tend to share common values with other members of these networks; to the extent that these networks constitute a resource, they can be seen as forming a kind of capital. As well as being useful in its immediate context, this stock of capital can often be drawn on in other settings. In general, then, it follows that the more people you know, and the more you share a common outlook with them, the richer you are in social capital (Field 2003: 1). The idea of social capital explains what is happening at that layer between individuals, institutions and the social world.

Social capital was found useful in this study as a heuristic device to explore a set of social phenomena which identifies education as central to its creation (Office of National Statistics 2001). It provided a theoretical framework to examine the learning process of students with few qualifications in an FE college. Exactly what it is and how we measure it remains problematical. However, it provided a useful model which incorporated the

traditional one of using education for upward social mobility and the more contemporary ideas connected to social inclusion. Social capital is connected to lifelong learning because the habits, values and attitudes built up through learning are said to encourage civic participation (Field 2003; Office of National Statistics 2001).

An element of social capital is trust. Different networks require differing levels of trust. Trust provides a bonding "glue" (Putnam in Field 2000: 19) that helps keep members of groups together. Bonding capital, the type that occurs in families and with friends, is necessary for "getting by": it keeps you within the boundaries of good citizenship and provides the close support necessary for success: it can, of course, if the family ties are too close, result in underachievement if the family does not value educational or other types of achievement. Looser trust bonds within networks that are less cohesive than the family, exist within bridging capital. These networks oil the wheels of commerce and "getting on"; it is the social capital that occurs between work colleagues and professional networks. It is the type of network that is useful for promotion. Membership of certain social groups is based on these ties. I suggest that, somewhere between these two forms of social capital, the network of the classroom operates, given the right educational conditions. The third type of social capital, linking capital, is for "getting ahead" and links people in dissimilar situations, those ties which cross networks and are probably used for promotion outside the smaller community (Woolcock in Field 2003).

One criticism of this theory is that it ignores power relationships and is used almost as a one-size-fits-all application to almost every social issue. It lacks strength in specificity and can become vague. Also, negative aspects, such as the exclusive nature of bonding capital, can be overlooked. Bridging capital appears to be more inclusive (perhaps because of its looser trust bonds) and less likely to fall prey to the insular aspects that can come from small, tightly bonded communities (Field 2003).

These ideas will be used in this study to show the bonding capital exhibited within the classroom culture and how that relates to the wider bridging capital that exists between the student and their work placement. It is not just the qualification that opens up new doors for the student, it is also the networks they have built up through their work placement and possibly through higher education for some. It could be said that the classroom exhibits trust and reciprocity. It may also have something to say about our

roles as teachers. Are we setting up conditions conducive to bonding capital which in turn gives the confidence to create bridging capital? The Schools and Social Capital Theory Group of the Applied Educational Research Scheme (2005) ask pertinent questions about those without educational qualifications having access to social capital.

John Field has made connections between social capital, lifelong learning and citizenship (2000, 2003, 2005). Field's studies gave the researcher a wider view of what learning means once embarked upon: what worlds students had access to. As he says, "it gives them confidence to go into social spaces with no other compass" (Field 2000: 51) by teaching them to cope with intangibles and uncertainties. Education as a passport to citizenship formed a link between networks, attitudes to learning and activity in the FE classroom. These ideas on social capital were used in Chapters 8 and 9 to give a form to how the pedagogic acts gave rise to the four tenets of social capital: norms, trust, reciprocity and networks.

2.1 Learning and discourse

Discourse issues are of particular interest to the researcher. My MPhil was about the use of discourse and metaphor in a secondary English class in a school with multi-lingual pupils. English teachers are always concerned with language, whatever other subject they are teaching. Although the college students in this study were not bilingual, speaking English only, they shared many of the characteristics of the pupils in my previous study (Coalter 2002). They appeared to be facing similar language and cultural barriers.

Anyone who has crossed a language barrier knows such a journey involves a form of shape-shifting or "self-translation" (Rushdie: 23.11.02: 6). If we see bilingualism as biculturalism, a concept well researched in Miller's study (1983) of 12 bilingual girls, academic discourse for my students when they returned to college could be considered almost to be a language from another culture. They had to learn to use it and, at the same time, reflect on how this use was affecting their learner identity. This "bicultural" shift in the adult learner was expressed through developing linguistic confidence.

Miller's ideas on gains and losses in language can be usefully transposed to the FE students' situation. She argues that to be "marooned" between two cultures and also

"occupying" two languages (Miller 1983: 9) may cause a sense of disequilibrium in terms of thinking; this is probably, according to Piaget (1959), when learning takes place. This learning discomfort zone is acknowledged as both an alienating and a liberating experience. It is beyond the scope of this study to establish how much of this code switching (Bell in Miller 1983) is responsible for the students' successful learning – or even if it related in such a direct way. What can be tentatively suggested is that the change that occurs may compare with the process of learning a new language and that this process could be seen as gains and losses in both first and second language. It could also be seen as a "bilingual" state where language is used as a resource in an optimal way in two different contexts: the language of home and that of the classroom and as a student in a professional workplace. What the students found in the college classroom was an unsettling atmosphere of change: this change required new language, new attitudes to that language, and a different relationship with learning. Readings on Bakhtin (Eagleton 1983 and Wertsch 1991) and McGonigal (2004) influenced the sections on discussion as a method of learning in showing the place of talk in transforming the person: the dialogic nature of talk has a dialectical relationship with language, meaning, context and definition of self. Through discussion we are always seeking not only understanding of what we and others are saying, but are also refining and redefining ourselves through that language. When words become "your own" the learning is also yours.

2.2 Discourse analysis

The theories of Cameron D. (1995), Gee (1999) and Cameron L. and Low (1999) were used in the interpretation of the language used in the interviews in Chapter 5. Students' metaphors were used as an analytical tool when discussing learning. Cameron and Low (1999: 25) argue for a contextually based understanding of the use of metaphor: what they call "language in use". What the researcher was conscious of, when interpreting the language, was that it had to be tied into the context of learning in the classroom.

> Discourse analysis is a reciprocal and a cyclical process in which we shuttle back and forth between the structure (form, design) of a piece of language and the situated meanings it is attempting to build about the world, identities, and relationships. (Gee 1999: 99)

The language the students used gave form to their "multiple identities". For the students, these identities were situated in different contexts: the classroom, the workplace and at home. Clarke (2002) puts this into a feminist framework when she says that women's identities are multi-various and often, when telling stories from their lives, they contain criteria by which the mother, the worker and the student can be evaluated. Clarke (2002: 73) discusses the "multiple, changing and often contradictory discourses of work, education and domestic life." Since the majority of the participants in this study were women (86%) and many of them, mothers, the idea of "contradictory discourse" was important.

Determining the definitive meaning of discourse is troublesome. It is one of those concepts which belong to many disciplines: discourse for a social scientist is concerned with words interpreting acts with talk being only part of the concept; it involves the context of the talk and the relationship (not always static) between the two or more discussants (Gee 1999). For the English teacher, discourse involves the above but concentrates on the linguistic properties of discourse. For an educational researcher, the textual analysis is not just in the text, but around it; it lies within the cultural norms of what counts as legitimate discourse in the classroom and elsewhere. It is the understanding of what can be said, how it should be said and how that speech event is received.

According to Van Dyck, discourse analysis involves the "many dimensions of text, talk and their cognitive, social and cultural contexts" (Jones et al 1997: 87). That is, it's the relationship between what and how the students write, talk and communicate non-verbally and the context in which they do it. This context is not just the immediate one where the event (speech or otherwise) is taking place but the social and cultural backgrounds that the students have brought to the discourse. Discourse also reflects a relationship between thinking and language use. It may seem that the definition of discourse is so all-encompassing that, in effect, it is in danger of losing its meaning.

To add to the complexities of defining discourse, it was used in three different ways in this study. Discourse analysis (with an emphasis on the use of metaphor) was used in the interviews to reach a deeper understanding of the more complex issues involved in learning. It was also used as a way of knowing about experience through narratives and

case histories. Thirdly, it was used in a more immediate sense in meaning the discussion and talk that happened in the classroom. Using language to discuss and analyse language can become tangled up in post-modernist, multi-dimensional arguments and some of the discussions in the reading were more baffling than helpful. Language analysis can be an important analytical tool but it can also lead to false certainties. To reach a way forward through these discourse readings it was decided to take the view that language uses us and is used by us. The students brought a set of linguistic mannerisms to college, essentially defined by culture and their relationship with educational institutions. Language lay at the heart of their learning experience and also at the heart of their expression of that experience.

2.3 Metaphors: making sense

Reading on metaphor was used to understand the cognitive and affective aspects of metaphor, how metaphor is used as a linguistic device for expressing concepts and how shared metaphors contribute to bonding within a group (Lakoff and Turner 1989; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Cameron L. 2003; Cameron and Low 1999). I chose to concentrate on metaphors in this analysis of the discourse for two reasons. As an English teacher I am interested in the more expressive forms of language and as an MPhil student my thesis was concerned with the relationship between metaphor and cognition (Coalter 2002). Secondly, the interviewees' used metaphors predominantly in their answers to the question on teaching and learning. There are powerful arguments about the conceptual understanding that the use of metaphor indicates: there are also arguments which indicate that using metaphors as a way of making sense of the world is a common occurrence (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). It was a way of representing the individual within the world of the classroom, a way of using their language to make sense of their thinking about their reality.

> Since much of social reality is understood in metaphorical terms, and since our conception of the physical world is partly metaphorical, metaphor plays a very significant role in determining what is real for us. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 146)

Metaphors are lexical shortcuts. They assume a mutual frame of reference between discursants, a way of bonding with a set of ideas. Every discipline contains its own set of metaphors. Pedagogy, in particular, owns metaphors that are often pejoratively called

jargon (for example, *scaffolding* and *active learning*). In the case of this research it was found that students adopted these metaphors. It is perhaps obvious that if you are training to work in education, metaphors used in education would come "naturally". It may also be obvious that the students would adopt the metaphors used by the researcher, since I had taught all of them for at least a year. Even if the students did not use them in answering the questions, they were familiar with the metaphors used both in the classroom and interview situation.

As Lakoff and Turner (1989: 56) say in *More than Cool Reason*, metaphors are "basic to the conceptual system on which our language and own culture are based". Interpreting what people say through metaphors is one way of coding which shows ways of organising and connecting both affective and cognitive aspects of the mind. It may be that metaphors represent a level of internal interaction between what you feel and what you think: using metaphors to express ideas on difficult and elusive concepts may elicit more meaningful data than literal and "factual" type questions and answers.

3.1 Learner identity

Weil's (1986: 223) definition of a learner identity is;

> …the ways in which adults come to understand the conditions under which they experience learning as "facilitating" or "inhibiting", "constructive" or "destructive". Learner identity suggests the emergence or affirmation of values and beliefs about "learning", "schooling", and "knowledge". The construct incorporates personal, social, sociological, experiential and intellectual dimensions of learning, as integrated over time.

Although this definition is used widely in adult educational studies, it appears to be so all-encompassing that its usefulness for more practical and detailed studies of connections between specific learning experiences and how they affected the participants, is limited because it lacks specificity. Although participation studies were useful in gaining knowledge about why certain groups come to college and why they stay (the dispositional factors were listed but not examined in depth), it was the few studies on learner identity which contributed most to the meaningful aspects of the learning experience in my research. Gaining an insight into learner attitudes require

more in-depth methods than those used in participation studies. It was the learner identity which affected and was most affected by their decision to stay and participate in a way which transformed the students' thinking.

Most of the studies concerned with learner identity were done with non-traditional students: adult returners and Access students. Weil's (1986) study of "non-traditional" students (previously unqualified) on undergraduate courses formed a foundation for the concept of learner identity. A poor learner identity had its origins in school experience; this experience was often overcome by a more positive outcome from the work experience. Gorard and Rees's (2002) study also made a contribution to the origins and determinants of this identity. They found that parental attitude during school years was the significant determinant. They found that most people fitted into 11 lifetime trajectories: the learner identity affected their trajectory in that the desire to learn could over-ride poor schooling experience. Gorard and Rees's study showed that, dependent on life-cycle factors, this attitude to learning could change.

Participation studies (McGivney 1991, 1996; Gorard and Rees 2002) discuss and use the concept of disposition to learn emanating from the term "dispositional" factors used by Cross (1981). What she meant in this earlier study were the characteristics, qualities and attitudes the students had towards learning and she linked them to theories of adult learning. She recognises that there are "learning prone" personalities (Cross 1981: 80) and accepts the concept of learner identity as critical to learning behaviour. There are times where people are particularly sensitive and open to learning – what she calls the "teachable moment" (Cross 1981: 127). How dispositional factors influence the learner identity of students was a theme that informed some of the interview questions in my research. What this study extrapolates from Cross' work is the model for understanding participation: her chain of response model starts with self-evaluation – the moment at which students decide to participate. The point at which my students decided they were able to cross the threshold of the college doors, and how they came to that decision, seemed to be linked to their learner identity. It may be that their learner identity changes at this point or that they have reached a point in their lives where transition is possible. This thinking gave rise to the question in the interviews: *At what age and why did you decide to come to college ?*

Education may be seen by some adults as merely a preparation for adult life ("it's what children do") rather than as a part of adult life. In the NIACE survey of 1987-9 from which McGivney draws this conclusion, 60% of non-participants expressed hostility towards education. Changing attitudes towards education brought about by poor experience at school or lack of support from home or other factors, is more long term and elusive. Financial incentives or changing institutional policy may not necessarily address deeply engrained attitudes. These attitudes may be changed however, through a positive experience of success in education. We know that retention rates tell us little about the effect of teaching (Robbins Report 1963 cited in McGivney 1996). It is the changing of these attitudes which, while not so deeply engrained as those non-participants in the NIACE surveys, remain to some degree with those students who make it through the doors of college. It is through the success of such participants that change may occur at a more structural level. It is these marginal participants, not the non-participants or the reluctant ones, who stand on the edges of the educational circle, who, through their success, may be able to pass on their experience to less confident groups. Funding for participation is often centred on those who are entrenched in negative attitudes to education. They have a range of difficulties which make access to education difficult. The students in my study had had, in general, poor experiences at school. They came to college with low cultural capital in the form of qualifications, but they had other resources which meant that success was a possibility. For the socially excluded, with little cultural capital, the leap is too far. It's like trying to be an elite athlete when your report card says, "Quite good at sport." Investing in people who have had some measure of success elsewhere and who have had experience of learning in a different context from school (in the case of my students, it was in the workplace and at home) may give better returns.

The most relevant determinant of later take-up in education was found to be the disposition to learn (Gorard and Rees 2002). More qualitative studies (Weil 1986; Gallagher et al 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000) use the concept of learner identity meaning the students' attitudes towards themselves as learners. In some studies the concepts become conflated. Dispositional factors, a disposition to learn and learner identity appeared to be the same. On first reading, I used the phrases interchangeably. As more data was collected in the interviews, I came to see them as different. Although my students had "fragile" (Gallagher 2000: 43) learner identities, they had a positive

disposition to learn. The two concepts were inextricably linked but it appeared that a change in learner identity was dependent on the condition of a disposition to learn.

Chappell et al (2003) discuss the construction of the learner identity and how discourse and pedagogies affect this construction. The origins, determinants and construction of the learner identity and how that identity can be changed, relate to the interpretation of the students' interviews done in this study; in particular, their school experience and how it shaped their academic confidence. Gorard and Rees describe those with a disposition to learn as having a "stable" learner identity – the willingness to learn in work, in their family role and in adult life in general. It is this set of learners which invest and contribute to the learning society: a set of people who have an interest in learning which had not been satisfied in their formal, earlier education.

Gorard and Rees' study (2002) found that their case studies has been unfulfilled in their desire to learn previously and the researchers made a tentative suggestion that the disposition to learn may be the most relevant determinant in returning to learn. A positive learner identity overcame structural and financial considerations. This factor is usually underestimated because survey methods, the main approach used in participation research, do not uncover this qualitative data. One of the questions for this study is how learner identity relates to learning and how the learning experience can create or enhance a positive learner identity.

3.2 The social construction of an identity
If school has as considerable an effect on learner identity as Gorard and Rees' study (2002) says it does, unravelling the complexities of individual action and actor within a set of social constraints was required. Although the learner identity of the student was an important part of the study, it had to be assumed that there were many reasons for not staying on at school. The cause for poor learner identity does not always equate with poor experience at school nor is that always the reason for non participation in further education. The issue is more complex than success or failure at school (Rees et al. 1997). Lack of success at school can often be an incentive for later study (Gorard and Rees 2002). One of the interview questions was designed to examine the relationship between school experience and learner identity. There was no intention to determine a causal relationship (this would be a study in itself) but to investigate some connection between

the students' views of themselves as learners and whether that was a legacy from school or as a result of wider life experience. Factors affecting learner identity were also implied in the second question on the questionnaire on how college was different from school. This question contained an assumption that students would reveal not only the practical aspects but also their feelings about the experience. There was a more direct question on learner identity in the interviews.

Other FE studies (Gallagher et al. 2000 and Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000) used the construct of learner identity. They looked at participation of those students who had "fragile" learner identities. The Gallagher study examined three groups of students at outreach centres: young school leavers, adult returners and people with additional support needs. What these groups had in common was their lack of confidence. They were in outreach centres because going to the college was too daunting. Gallagher's research was helpful in describing the learning experiences of adult returners and young school leavers as these groups were also in my study. However, there was little available research on the relationship between success, learner identity and what characteristics of that construct changed and were affected by what educational experience. In Gallagher's (2000) study it came to mean a global confidence in their ability to achieve. To achieve what and how is left to more longitudinal studies.

Gallagher's (2000) participation study follows McGivney's studies (1990, 1999) in looking at barriers to learning, motivation factors and those elements associated with non-progression for each group. What was a departure from other studies in the Gallagher research, and that is also pertinent to this study, was the development of a "learning career", looking at how students redefine themselves in the light of this learning. The study looks at the college environment and tutor and peer support and how this affects the students' self-perception. The establishment of a more positive learner identity as a result of this change in self-perception led the students to change their goals. For young people there was a marked increase in self-confidence. The learning environment favoured by adult returners was found to be: being allowed to work at own pace; small, informal class settings; tutors talk on students' level; individual support; positive encouragement; enjoyable and relaxed. Both adult returners and young people felt that the relationships with staff were pivotal to maintaining their studies. This pointed to a need for a more in-depth study on staff-student relationships and the type of

guidance and support required. Further research by Baker and Comfort (2004) on FE and HE students emphasised the importance of this relationship.

Bloomer and Hodkinson's ESRC study (2000) of 16 learning sites in FE over 4 years, explores the transformatory nature of learning, the main characteristic being the students making personal sense of their contexts. It is not just a question of skills input and learning outcomes, nor can it be reduced to competencies. Learning needs to be concerned with their self-perceptions as learners and how they make sense of ideas and connect learning to life. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) argue for a case by case, site by site approach to understanding learning pathways. Their study, according to Gallagher,

> … argues against the dominant positivist paradigm where learning is conceptualised as a product of input-output mechanisms to an analysis of learning as a subjective experience and a transformatory process which cannot be separated from other life experiences. (Gallagher et al. 2000: 21)

Connelly and Halliday's (2001) research on 700 students in 10 FE colleges indicated that, although the curriculum was important, it was not the content that made FE study important. 69% were motivated to return to college to increase their self-confidence and were more interested in the "broad thrust of their learning" (Connelly and Halliday 2001: 190) than the individual competencies they acquired. "It is clear that students want learning to connect to life as they live it locally and vice versa," (Connelly and Halliday 2001: 191). This connection of learning with life experience is a thread which runs throughout my study. Learning takes place within the sum total of the students' experiences and if it is to be a "transformatory process" it must situate itself, and be situated by the student, within that context.

3.3 Dweck's theory of self: motivation, self-esteem and other issues
Dweck's (2000) theories on how we perceive intelligence and how those perceptions relate to motivation were useful in the examination of school performance, college success and learner identity. Her studies compared students' performance: they were grouped according to those who had a belief that they could change their ability to learn something and those who thought intelligence was immutable and couldn't be developed. Those who believed that they could master a task even though there may be

initial failure were more likely to succeed than those who, although they had been successful in other tasks, were unwilling to try because they risked initial failure. For students with few qualifications who came to college, the view of intelligence as being fixed and innate, may have pertained.

Self-esteem is closely connected to learner identity but was found to be difficult to research. There were numerous definitions and many tests based on different assumptions: 200 different measures of self-esteem have been developed (Emler 2001). Emler's study was used because it contained the most comprehensive review of the research. Self-esteem has come to be linked to all types of behaviour; there is an assumed connection between high self-esteem and success. Emler's review maintains that there is no systematic evaluation of intervention programmes; those who score low on self-esteem inventories (Coopersmith 1981, being widely used) are not more likely to fail academically; in fact, there did not appear to be a strong relationship between self-esteem and educational attainment in Feinstein's (2000) study of 8500 members of the 1970 British Cohort Study where self-esteem was only marginally related to later educational attainment. Where there appeared to be a stronger relationship was where there were "education-specific self-esteem" (Emler 2001: 28) programmes. Inconclusive evidence abounds and the only (small) relationship that was consistently found was that attainment had an effect on self-esteem and not the other way round. Two interview questions in my study were attempts to make a link between success and expectations. There was no attempt to link these to self-esteem and apart from one of the factors on the questionnaire which was increase in self-confidence, it was decided to leave it up to the student to evaluate this area of complexity or, at least, to give it a name of their choosing. Self-confidence had been determined from the beginning of the thesis as a factor over which pedagogic practice had some control through feedback, support and encouragement, but for the most part, it was largely individual and almost impossible to monitor or measure.

4.1 Theories of teaching and learning

Theories of learning were used extensively in the final chapter on learning and teaching models. They were also used to examine the relationship between the students' learning profile and teacher identities recognised in the FE classroom in Chapter 8. They will be briefly referred to in this review and connected to the overall themes of lifelong learning.

Much of the empirical data that was available came from studies done in higher education on university students and students on Access to university courses (Brookfield 1990; Entwistle 1996; Claxton 1999, to name three). Where possible, research done by practitioners was chosen. The three researchers mentioned above are all lecturers in higher education.

Theories were selected using two criteria: their implicit use in colleges (from classroom observation general practice appeared to be student activity and assessment preceded by some demonstration) and in the literature and texts used explicitly on TQ(FE) (Teaching Qualification in Further Education) courses which espoused the holy trinity of adult education: reflective thinking, learning through discussion and self-directed learning together with application of the ideas of Kolb and Knowles (Eraut 1994) : in other words, what theories related to what appeared to be going on in the classrooms and what was advocated as best practice in the training course. This study cannot concern itself with where the rhetoric matched the practice, however, given my role as classroom observer on the TQ(FE) course and also on the college staff development course, there was more of an opportunity than most lecturers had, to know where there was this match. The thesis required a definition of some terms that have become absorbed into the pedagogical lexicon of the college. Talk of student-centred learning, experiential and competency based learning were all familiar terms in the college. Some professionals adopt the terms of the discourse and they become common parlance. The expectation is not that we re-examine them daily. What was necessary for this study, however, was some clarity on what the terms used by the lecturers and those espoused by the teaching course, meant and how these related to practice.

4.2 The FE context

As mentioned previously, HE and FE have become blurred in their identity in terms of type of student, course and learning approaches. Most of the research was done on HE methods of teaching and learning (Hodkinson and James 2003: 390 describe FE as a "significantly under-researched sector"); this meant that although there was considerable participation material (mainly quantitative) on students with few qualifications, there was not an extensive amount on how these students experienced learning. Colleges of further education tend towards a competency based model in viewing the educational process as input-output, skills-based and requiring an androgogic (adult learning)

approach. Competency based learning can give a certainty to the educational process by ensuring that outcomes are specific and explicit and so less certain learners have a sense of a goal to work towards. It may also provide a more democratic basis for a learner-lecturer relationship because the assessments appear less subjective. There is less dispute involved when goals are agreed, leaving more time for learning. Elbow's (1979) research on competency based learning was used to inform the model; it presented a balanced view on this type of approach. He came to the same conclusion as others (Brookfield 1990; Grant 1979; Eraut 1994) about its limitations. Goals can be both limiting and liberating. It was a useful argument to explore in examining students with few qualifications.

4.3 Vocational learning

> No worthwhile vision of the learning society can ignore the enormous potential for learning provided by the workplace, especially when this is integrated with learning in other settings. (Spours et al. 2000: 98)

The vocational nature of FE relies on the workplace (whether simulated in college or in industry) as a source of material for college-based learning and as apprenticeship type learning. The workplace requires a more diffuse, flexible problem-solving aptitude than college; the ability to transfer skills and adapt knowledge is not easily translated into competency based learning, mainly because it is difficult to teach these things quickly and even more difficult to assess "accurately". SVQs are assessed in a "tick box" manner and learning is treated as accomplished when behaviour is seen to say so. Any learning for which there is no evidence (for example, learning about process, the kind of learning that Brookfield (1990, 1998) saw as effecting change both personal and social) is difficult to consider in practical learning (Mezirow 1998).

The call for a more adaptable workforce has led to much research on market requirements and matching those up with teaching/learning methods and styles. Adult learning theories, cultural theories of situated cognition and communities of practice, and social theories of communal and group learning are well researched issues within adult learning. However, there was no conclusive evidence on what works. The best comment that surfaces is, "it all depends" (Entwistle 1996: 111). This is something that

educators of experience know. Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000) recommendation for examining learning careers on a case by case, site by site basis, makes sense. Apart from the obvious time constraints of such research, it seems to make sense to say that learning depends on the contextual circumstances: what type of learning for what students at what stage.

Investment in training, "buying" knowledge, is seen to have increasing returns (Peters 2002). However, it is acknowledged that "know-how" knowledge is tacit and thus difficult to measure. Some FE colleges may have difficulty with these areas of non-quantifiable knowing.

> Tacit knowledge in the form of skills needed to handle codified knowledge is more important than ever in labour markets… Education will be the centre of the knowledge-based economy, and learning the tool of individual and organisational advancement… where learning-by-doing is paramount. (Peters 2002: 8)

What is of interest for this present research is that by emphasizing this type of learning and its importance to the economy, research on knowledge economy has legitimated "learning-by-doing"; what has been seen heretofore as a less legitimate way of acquiring knowledge.

The theories of learning and teaching will be reviewed here, bearing in mind that acts of teaching are often an eclectic mix of many theories and that what happens in the classroom cannot always be "theorised". Good practice depends as much on good timing as it does on knowledge of student, subject and theories of learning. The last two chapters of this thesis use an amalgam of theories and practice and it could only be summarised here as a list of general aspects. The data indicated that the "self-directed" student and experiential learning, reflective practice and critical thinking were the elements that made up the formula for successful learning in this study. This data led to a choice of theories that had some currency in FE and some which may have been described as "fanciful". (This is, of course, pure speculation on my part as they were never tested except in my classroom. It may be that the lecturers would have welcomed them with open arms.)

Theories of learning and teaching included:

situated cognition;

adult learning sometimes known as andragogy;

experiential learning;

reflective practice;

critical thinking;

self-directed learning ;

integrated learning theory.

4.4 Situated cognition: communities of practice

Situated learning is based on the principles of experiential learning within a cultural context of a community of practice. For example, for the students in this study, the community of practice was the classroom in a school or adult service centre working with people with learning difficulties. Lave and Wenger (1991) in their studies of somewhat esoteric communities of practice (Yucatec midwives and meat cutters to name two) show how learning takes place in practical situations where members of that practice community share discourses and modes of learning. This is not just a passing on of information or skills but a gradual educational initiation which legitimises and educates those on the periphery (like placement students) in becoming full members of that community. Both Lave and Wenger (1991) and Brown et al. (1989: 33) show that "learning is a process of enculturation". The theory says that knowledge is context-specific and to transfer knowledge from one context to another we need to be taught about the application to the new context through reflection on the experiential learning (Brown et al. 1989). Transferring knowledge to the new context requires modifications of old schemata. These theories do not deny a type of generic knowledge nor do they eschew ways of applying knowledge to new situations but they propose that knowledge of the new situation must be substantial for generic principles to be extrapolated and applied (Wallace 1996). For further education colleges this is an important concept as we are aware of the requirement "to link theory and practice and to apply underpinning knowledge", as practically every module descriptor from the SQA intones. The difficulty is that not much is known about this link between college-based and work-based learning and, while we know the problem of application is there, whether reflective practice on experiential learning through the use of a facilitator is the way to make these connections, we simply don't know; it requires more research.

Work-based learning and its relation to more formal learning requires that we define the difference in the type of knowledge that is acquired in the two sites. Eraut et al. (2000) proposed two types of knowledge which are relevant to this debate. They are codified and personal knowledge. Codified knowledge is that knowledge which is stored in books and legitimated through testing to gain qualifications. Personal knowledge is that everyday knowledge (some may use the term common sense) which is brought to bear on working out solutions to practical problems. This is usually gained through role-modelling, hand-me-down or personal experience and reflection which learns from that experience. The two knowledges have a different relationship with skills. Skills are often taught in addition to codified knowledge, a means by which you can enhance your choice of application of your codified knowledge. With personal knowledge, skills are embedded in that knowledge. It could be argued that this is a non-argument in that in most people's lives, we use both types of knowledge. However the status of knowledge is at issue here, as is the definition of how learning takes place and how one type of learning can give us access to another. If codified knowledge is mainly to be gained in formal learning and qualifications are required to gain access to this learning, then it becomes important to show that people who have gained personal knowledge in the workplace can use that knowledge to gain entry to, and acquire codified knowledge from, formal educational establishments.

> … learning is an essentially personal process which occurs within mainly social contexts whose multi-layered communications are only minimally receptive to codification. (Eraut et al. 2000: 233)

Not all of the learning in the workplace could be translated into the codified knowledge of the classroom. What was important for these students was that knowledge gained through the workplace was legitimate and was required to make codified knowledge have some meaning. (A similar reference is made in section 4.7.) There are commonalities here with Piaget's theories of assimilation and accommodation and his later theories which suggested that these schemata which absorbed, assimilated and changed through the incorporation of new ideas were personal and contextualised (Eraut 1994). Many of the interviewees in my study commented on this "personalising" process and also that what they learned at work placement, often because it was so idiosyncratic

and context specific, was difficult to measure in terms of more academic learning. In fact, at times during the interviews, it was as if the students were echoing educational theorists in their vernacular. When this happened, it authorised my use of the learning theory.

Other communities of practice were the classroom where they were college students and another, perhaps more metaphorical community, where they were recipients of a "second chance". It is difficult to elaborate on this imagined community and it can only be summed up in an amorphous way. It was in some way related to a group collectivity, embarking on a journey where there were *"all in the same boat"* (Susan) and where some were willing to engage in taking risks in the hope that they would get something in return. There was a shared sense of purpose. This sense of community in relation to learning directly informed the chapters on discourse and learning and teaching.

4.5 Theories of "adult learning"

Why do theories of adult learning have legitimacy? Do adults learn differently from children enough to produce a term (andragogy instead of pedagogy) to merit this difference? Does it emanate from developmental differences or is there a requirement for a different approach because of the different social dynamics which exist in a classroom of adults? Kolb and Knowles represent this body of work on adult learning (Eraut 1994). I have referred to Kolb under experiential learning because experience plays a large part in adult learning (Smith 2001). The recognition and use of experience is effective for social relationships within the classroom and for situating knowledge within existing schemata (a term used by Piaget whose theories are used as a basis for understanding cognition and modes of learning in many texts [Entwistle 1991; Eraut 1994]).

Knowles (Cross 1981) assumes that adults are different learners from children because: they are self-directing; they use experience as a resource for learning; they see learning in the light of its usefulness and they use learning for problem solving. What is in question here is not the difference between ages (most, if not all, can be applied to children; it's just a question of degree) but that the emphasis shifted from teaching to learning (particularly at the time Knowles proposed these). Cross (1981) maintains that Knowles' ideas amount to a theory of instruction rather than a theory of adult learning. This seems to miss the point in terms of the thrust of this thesis. Knowles' theories have

resulted in an ethos which has become embedded in pedagogy in further education. The ethos (in common parlance) translates something like this:

students are different from pupils;

lecturers are different from teachers;

college is different from school;

your experience is valued and useful for learning;

students are "self-directed";

knowledge you acquire at college is useful.

The first three establish an appeal for students who have not had a successful school experience. The next two validate and establish an understanding of adult independence and the last one justifies (in terms of pragmatism) vocational learning as distinct from academic. Knowles is useful in a college context because he allows learning to be re-defined in social terms. The effect, at times, is that, it may make "facilitators" of lecturers, people who manage knowledge which students already have. It is common knowledge in colleges that lecturers have to teach disciplines in which they have scant knowledge. This adult learning approach may make better workers and encourage students who have had a poor prior learning experience, but it may also serve a practical purpose for the type of education and instruction that colleges have to provide, often, with limited resources.

Adult learning theories informed the generic nature of the learning and teaching model. Since college teaching practice was imbued with these theories and the principles were embedded almost as axiomatic, it was critical that the model that emanated from the students' comments, also considered what was already happening in the FE classrooms.

4.6 Experiential Learning

Experiential learning theories are directly related to the findings in this research in that the students drew upon their experiences from many contexts, with the main one being their work placement. Stories and examples from work were essential to show application and reflection. There are at least 12 definitions of experiential learning (Moon 2004: 108-9). Most writers on experiential learning agree that it requires critical thinking to be useful (Brookfield 1993, Kolb (Smith 2001), Rogers 2002, Boud and Walker 1993). Without it, experience is little more than "anecdotal reminiscence"

(Brookfield 1993: 30). Having an experience and learning from it can be two different things.

Kolb's learning cycle has four components which move from observing and reflecting on the concrete experience to forming abstract knowledge which then allows for some testing in a new context. From this cycle he draws four types of learners for each stage. Criticisms are obvious for any staged learning process: there are sequencing mishaps; there is overlap and the learning styles are overly simplistic and not necessary outcomes of types of action. From this has emanated a whole industry in linking teaching approach to learning styles.

Kolb's cycle is useful for planning teaching activities and affords an organic way of using workplace practice as experience on which to reflect in class. It brings together both contexts well. Learning styles are useful for increasing knowledge about learning in general and the acknowledgement that people have differing ways of learning loosens out the assumptions about traditional styles of learning upon which rigid academic assessments are often made.

In a college of further education there is an assumption that an experiential way of learning through a simulated environment (either a workshop, role-play or kitchens and hairdressing salons) means that knowledge, or at least a set of skills, is passed on through some apprenticeship type process: learning by watching and practising. Transference to the real situation is an assumption based on "impoverished models which rest on untenable implicit theories of learning" (Wallace 1996: 16). The "lecturer as facilitator" emanates from these theories. Skills and knowledge become partners and the experience becomes the teacher. The "facilitator" or lecturer, supports the learner in making sense of the experience through a reflective process.

All four stages of Kolb's model can be facilitated in a classroom. The testing stage appears to be the most difficult although this is often a simple matching up with their or other students' and lecturers' experience in work, placement or elsewhere. The primary weakness of the model seems to be the solipsistic nature (as it appears in the stages) of the model. It does leave a question about areas of knowledge that do not come through experience. It seems to draw on a limited world.

Relevance to self and immediate access to experience may be only one source for learning. Testing out whether something has validity through the limited world of your peers and perhaps your work colleagues, may be reductionist. It may be that the internal world has an experiential nature of its own which involves not doing but thinking. Reflection and experiential learning are essentially about an internal world. To learn, it is necessary to use these to resolve our relationship with the external world.

4.7 Schon's theories on reflective practice

Reflective thinking emanates from experiential learning; it transforms experience into learning. We reflect to: understand our own learning; review behaviour critically, draw theory from observation and resolve ambiguities. Jennifer Moon (1999) says that these lead to self-development which leads to empowerment. Reflective thinking is reviewed here because it has a high status within educational circles and the associated language (perhaps parlance would be more accurate) is commonplace. The influence it exerts, without apparent useful documented outcome, is interesting, if not fruitful for this study. Although the term "reflective practitioner" is, like experiential learning and theories of andagogy, ubiquitous, it would seem that all this reflection is neither documented, communicated or shared. I am doubtful that it is different from critical thinking and that it necessarily leads to "empowerment" through "self-development" (Moon 1999: 23). If it is a case of being a better thinker then it may lead to more control over the vicissitudes of life.

> The systematic knowledge base of a profession is thought to have four essential
> properties. It is specialised, firmly bounded, scientific and standardised. (Schon 1983:
> 23)

Schon set out to refute the importance placed on the transmission of this "codified" (Eraut 1994: 39) knowledge in teaching. Knowledge, said Schon, is personal, tacit and is about process and know-how. Propositional knowledge (mainly the type of knowledge we receive in higher education from whence all teachers come) has a limited scope for using your personal know-how. However personal knowledge, our impressions, hunches and intuitive understanding, allow us to form, reform and transform propositional knowledge into a learning process: it is only through our personal cognitive framework

that we can have an understanding of codified knowledge within a meaningful context. (See 4.4 for an earlier discussion on codified knowledge and communities of practice.) This personal knowledge is necessary when examining our own practice with a view to improving it. If we define reflection as "bringing personal knowledge under critical control" (Eraut 1994: 156) then this fits in with what the students are encouraged to do in class and in practice and also what we role model when we reflect on our own practice as teachers. Schon's theories have dominated teaching practice for the last 20 years at least. As a PGCE secondary school tutor I was certainly aware of the importance of the phrase "reflective practitioner" in the late 1980s, a benchmark by which practice was judged. As a PGCE student myself in the early 1970s, we were encouraged to reflect on our practice although I don't remember a distinction being made between this type of thinking and critical appraisal.

Eraut (1994) claims that Schon's theory is a theory of metacognition. It is less a recipe for a process in changing practice (because there are no indications on how to do this reflective thinking) and more a way of thinking about the way we think. It is at the once-removed stage of examining practice. For reflective thinking to be useful in practice, rather than a mechanical exercise, it must provide a way of learning which can be applied in the classroom through pattern recognition, experiential insight and context knowledge. We can see how this thinking links in with situational learning and other (Brookfield and Entwistle) sources in this literature review. However, because the classroom is a busy place and many actions and reactions are made quickly, the nature of the job makes this type of contemplative thinking difficult. Schon's distinctions between reflection-on-action and in-action seem somewhat academic in the light of the pressures of channel-hopping teaching methods. The distinction seems to be a matter of time and place but the process appears to be the same. Reflection on what is happening in the class at the time is necessary so that you can change direction. This of course assumes that the teacher/lecturer has that control or even wants it. Some of the best learning experiences that have occurred in my classroom have been engineered and conducted by the students.

The single most useful extrapolation from Schon is that theory can be generated from practice. He allows us to value and intellectualise practice. Here again, the benefits of

this theory are the challenges it presents to our preconceived and entrenched attitudes to practical learning.

> The dominant conception of learning in our culture – so dominant that children have been socialized into it by the age of 7 or 8 – is that learning involves the explicit acquisition of externalised codified knowledge. (Eraut 1994: 39)

Perhaps Schon's theory has been partly responsible for adjusting the academic myth that practical knowledge is less valuable because it is context bound whereas theoretical knowledge is somehow superior because it is relatively free from such practical constraints. It is both the context-free notion and the superiority of knowledge that is not tied into situations that Schon questions. Most teachers discuss teaching within the context of their class and classroom (Eraut 1994). Knowledge is usually context specific, even if it means you have made it your own by appropriating it. The importance of context in learning was an essential element of this study.

By establishing a process which allows for deeper levels of reflection (not all reflection is, of course, like this) Schon has shown that practice can generate critical thinking which, through application, can give us interpretative and creative ways to think about our practice. Details of this reflective process (how to do it) appear to be a bit woolly. The theory of reflection-in-action, as messy and haphazard as it may turn out to be in the classroom, informs the teaching/learning model. The implications for staff development and the use of Schon's theories are open-ended as they stress the importance of personalising the classroom context. This approach argues against universals and givens about teaching and the epistemology of effective practice. How we go about knowing what is effective has to begin with our locus. I would tentatively suggest this means what kind of teacher we want to be, how best to present *our* subject and how the students sitting in front of us will relate to it.

4.8 Critical Thinking (Brookfield)

> Helping learners acquire a critically alert mind – one that is sceptical of claims to final truths or ultimate solutions to problems, is open to alternatives, and acknowledges the

contextuality of knowledge – is the quintessential education process. (Brookfield 1990: 21-2)

Brookfield's (1990) theories of learning and instruction redefine the power relationships within the classroom. By encouraging students to be "sceptical", it may be that the lecturer is undermining the traditional power base of the teacher and who determines what is a "truth". By questioning the very notion of "expert" he throws open structures of control which effect the basis of who produces and creates knowledge. His is essentially a critical pedagogic approach as he sees it as essential for democracy and adulthood and in effect, liberating. He considers the dynamics of the student as co-educator as essential, the process more important than the outcome and warns against the risks of this approach. It makes students uncertain, can cause control issues and involves much soul-searching on the part of the teachers' assumption of practice. There is a strong cognitive element to the process of critical thinking and it is often discussed (and confused) with reflective thinking.

Critical thinking differs from reflective thinking in that it has the following components.
It identifies and challenges assumptions.
It recognises the influence of context on thoughts and action.
It considers alternative ways of thinking.
It confronts established truths and expert opinion.
In my classroom, when students reflected by merely describing experience at placement, these four tenets were summed up in the phrase "dig deeper".

One aspect of success in adult learning is the type of thinking that is required for gaining an HN award. If, as teachers, we encourage them to aspire to be critical thinkers, we are endorsing that there is a hierarchy of learning and the pinnacle can be reached through a certain set of cognitive know-how. Knowledge, how it is gained and how we prove we have it, is exhibited in certain cognitive behaviour. One of these behaviours is the ability to think critically. When my students went on to university for their degree they were told that "the hope here is to make you critical thinkers". This is week one of the Access course. It would be interesting to know (but not within the scope of this research) whether their university lecturers had considered the degree of critical thinking that may

have occurred previously or whether the lecturers thought that this was the first time the "FE students" had been exposed to this way of learning.

Critical thinking approaches to teaching and learning were the central aspects of the model in the final chapter. The data from the students' interviews indicated that they had acquired a level of thinking which indicated the use of both cognitive and socio-emotional domains.

4.9 Self-directed learning, study strategies and emotion

As one of the main factors indicated by the respondents in the questionnaire, self-directed learning took on an importance in this study which surprised the researcher. The students indicated that it was the main difference between school and college. This demanded further investigation. Self-directed learning is both an instructional process and implies a state of mind or attitude to the responsibility for learning. Choice is the essence of self-direction where the student assumes a primary responsibility for his/her learning (Brocket and Hiemstra 1991). Brookfield (1990) also links critical reflection, rational thinking and study skills and self-direction. Active learning and self-directed learning are linked to independence and deep learning.

Entwistle's (1996) research on students in higher education looked at the different strategies that self-motivated students use. He defined self-directed learners as active learners who "seek out the information they need, judge their own progress and are self-motivated" (1996: 98). They use study strategies which he distinguishes as "deep", "surface" and "strategic". Deep learning, which Entwistle describes as a transformatory experience, means that they understand concepts, apply knowledge and take a critical stance. The intention of the surface approach is to reproduce information; this is where the student relates in a superficial and fragmented way to the course, picking up bits of knowledge without really understanding things in a cohesive way. The strategic approach has the passing of the course as its central concern. Time organization and finding out what is required are the main activities. What makes the self-directed learner successful is knowing when to use each approach. Not everything has to be learned in a deep, conceptual way. Sometimes, particularly in this accreditation hungry world, it makes sense to approach part of the course in a strategic way.

Entwistle (1996: 103) found that cognitive and emotional aspects of learning are "inseparable". Providing the right environment to make these connections involved showing the students how to look at ideas critically, being open to exploration and discovery and "not to be fearful" (Bruner 1979: 4) of their creative insights. Adult returners and those who have had uneasy passages through education learn to wrestle with tensions and paradox but more critically, they learn courage. Rogers (1996) sees adult education as being an area of emotional anxiety where fear of intellectual (as opposed to practical) tasks gets in the way of learning. "Fear of the ambiguous, disorder and lack of self-esteem" (1996: 215) leads the students to thinking in polarities and rendering the issues in black and white. They cling to existing patterns and ways of thinking to reduce the anxiety and resist change. In this study, these educational theories related to issues of learner identity and the difference between school and college as seen by the questionnaire respondents.

4.10 Claxton's Integrated Learning Theory

Claxton takes a pragmatic approach and although his theories are not directly used in the model, they provided an understanding of how students who may not be there "for the love of it" (although the data was surprising in showing how true this altruistic idea of learning became for many) made decisions about learning. This view of learning is similar to Entwistle's and is based on five central ideas which constitute a psychological approach on whether to learn and how to learn best. Learners need a set of "defensive strategies" (Claxton 1996: 4) to make these optimal decisions; and, these strategies depend on residual learning experiences. As the data in Chapter 5 shows, making decisions and being trusted to make decisions, represented something more than taking control.

Claxton despairs of learning theories, saying Kolb is "as good as it gets" and that "warmed-over Piaget for grown ups is not going to do the trick" (Claxton 1996: 6). He seeks to tie up existing ideas of how people learn in a "comprehensive approach" to say that the context (the when, where and why of learning) is as important as the 'how'. In fact the 'how' depends on the other contextual factors. Claxton's theory contains elements of situated learning and reflective thinking; the eclecticism of Claxton's approach is useful as it broadly represents the educational fair exchange that we work in. It was a reminder to the researcher that the students learned in a context where pressures

and responsibilities were not always under their control and that they had individual reasons for, and approaches to, that learning.

4.11   Teacher Identities

> The pedagogic focus of adult education was to adapt and transform traditional teaching practices and the context of courses to include students for whom the standard cultural capital of universities was opaque and alienating. (Zukacs and Malcolm www.open.ac.uk/lifelong learning: 1)

Zukas and Malcolm's study on lifelong learning pedagogies was useful in that it used the context of non-traditional students in HE to examine teacher identities. It focused on the events in the classroom. It looked at the "participatory processes in adult learning (that) have been grossly neglected" (Salisbury and Murcott 1992: 573). Zukas and Malcolm (www.open.ac.uk/lifelong learning) state that higher education takes no account of the different origins of its mature students from those of its school leavers, despite the fact that mature students constitute the majority of the student population in university. Zukas and Malcolm look at pedagogic identities, focusing, as they say "somewhat unfashionably" (p.2), on educators. This qualifying aside is both interesting in its assessment of fashion in research but also in its need to be said. Their study gave me the confidence to acknowledge the presence of the teacher in the classroom, particularly in a culture where the action of teaching appears to have little status.

"Teach" is not a word often used in college: there are other verbs for what we do in FE: I was in the job for five years before I heard anyone use the word "teach" in a serious context. "Deliver" is a more common word. I suggest that someone who self-defines their job as a deliverer, rather than a teacher, has perhaps a different classroom approach. Whether you call yourself a teacher, lecturer or educator is probably defined by the institution. Your choice of self-definition probably depends on your initial training in education, in what sector you have spent the majority of your career, what sector is accorded the highest status, or in what role you consider yourself to have been most valued. How you define what you do affects the events in the classroom and the identities of the students. In their article on pedagogies for lifelong learning the researchers set out to establish a set of identities or "masks" (Bailey 1977, cited in Zukas

and Malcolm p.2). Zukas and Malcolm identified, but did not evaluate, five pedagogic identities. Some of these are examined in Chapter 8 in the light of roles and types of educators that occur in the FE context and how these roles affect the type of student that succeeds.

4.12   New learning and the new learner: education for uncertainty

This section of the literature review connects the larger issues of lifelong learning and social inclusion and that of teaching and learning. While education reflects the fragmented and uncertain post-modern world in which the students may succeed (only because it doesn't look like the old world of certainty where they did not) it is a double-edged sword. As second chance learners, they have a low tolerance for uncertainty. These students are not equipped when they first enter college, psychologically or sociologically, to deal with the idea of knowledge as relative, nor with ambiguity, reflective thinking and fragmentary sets of ideas. At first they may want the established truths, the black and white world, the teacher as the giver of knowledge. To flourish in a self-reflective educational world they need skilful teaching.

Langer et al.'s (1989) paper on conditional teaching provided some valuable ideas on how this uncertainty of ideas and concepts can be translated into the classroom. Their research was too small a sample to draw any generalizations (102 high school students and 59 undergraduates) although they drew some tentative connections between conditional teaching and creative thinking (poetry writing). If information is delivered as if it were absolute then the student is poorly prepared for the "unexpected use of that information" (Langer et al. 1989: 140). To educate for both cognitive and social uncertainties it requires a way of extracting their personal thinking and building on their confidence as learners.

The most interesting suggestion that comes from this research is that the presentation mode must not appear uncertain – even when expressing the uncertainty of principles. We must be certain about uncertainty. Conditional teaching is about the presentation of knowledge. It presents some knowledge as uncertain and teaches the student to handle ambiguities in a robust way. The study makes claims that if information is presented in an absolute way then the student is poorly prepared for the unexpected use or the unfamiliar questioning of such information. They cannot think flexibly. The

methodology in their study, using what appeared to be controlled "experiments" rather than classroom observation and interviews, evaluating creativity and such subjective aesthetics by using numerical data, appears unsound. However, their ideas resonated with classroom experience and were endorsed by other studies done by educationalists (Claxton 1996). Rethinking and remoulding information into new contexts means that it needs to have some mutability in its initial makeup and understanding. In an FE context where the certainty of competence based learning and assessment can sometimes be tyrannical, it was good news to hear that uncertainty did have a role in teaching and learning.

> Much of the new adult learning is designed to enable learners to deal with intangibles and uncertainties. In a relatively fluid and open society, the fact that it can often provide only temporary reassurance seems to be an acceptable price to pay in return for the confidence to go into social spaces with no other compass… when the value of cultural capital can fluctuate rapidly, a lightweight approach to learning makes a great deal of sense! (Field 2000: 51)

Dealing with "intangibles and uncertainties" in a metamorphosing world provides them with some of the cultural capital (of which a qualification is only a small, finite and concrete part) to succeed.

The new educational order, like advertising and self-help books, is trying to meet the needs of the market: this consumer approach may result in a "lightweight approach" (Field 2000: 51). Teaching assertiveness skills, interpersonal and counselling skills and other programmes generated by the "banality of self-awareness" (Lasch in Field (2000): 50) may seem "lightweight". However, this makes the assumption that these skills stay isolated, residing in a vacuum; it may be that these foundation courses are necessary for those needing self-confidence to absorb further learning. (This, of course, makes an assumption about the relationship between self-confidence and effective learning.) "Lightweight learning" may be an initial way of allowing the student to feel "relaxed" (Gallagher et al. 2000) in an environment previously seen as intimidating. By making do with the lightweight learning and stopping there, it may enable the student to deal with the world as is (and this may be as good as it gets: traditional education may be accused of not even equipping us with those limited skills) but it does not equip us to reflect on

and change our relationship with that world. It is this deeper learning which can then equip them with the cognitive and emotional intelligence to make sense of the changing and "uncertain" world and to become lifelong learners.

4.12 Feminism and knowledge
The social construction of knowledge

Since the research participants are mainly female in my study, feminist theories of adult education need to be examined. Three studies were useful in this area. If, as Mal Leicester (2001) says, knowledge is not neutral, but socially constructed in the male image, how does this relate to a group of women returning to adult education? Within my research, Leicester's feminist critique ties in with the understanding of how critical thinking is represented within education communities as "male" thinking – aggressive, hierarchical and objective (Chappell et al. 2003). How thinking can have behavioural traits I'm not sure; perhaps it is the expression of the thought that is aggressive.

If lifelong learning and training tend to be taken up by those who have previous qualifications and thus reproduces the social order and if it endorses the gender gap by validating knowledge which is "male" – determined by endorsing the type of thinking which women with life experience find less relevant (Leicester 2001), then women with no previous qualifications are at a double disadvantage. For this group of learners, the gender and class factors conspired to relegate them to the most disadvantaged group. However, gender and class are not unproblematic and interpretation required more than surface explanations to do with motivation, cultural attitudes towards education and the role of women (wives and mothers) in that culture.

We are educated into believing that there is a model of thinking which is mainly the science model of hypothesis, deductive and inductive reasoning set on a bedrock of logic which gets us there – what is sometimes described as a male way of thinking (Jones et al. 1997). It puts less value on knowledge generated by personal experience and the potential of autobiography and narrative for learning. Students in my class tell, and are encouraged to tell, many personal stories. The lecturer also used stories to demonstrate, illustrate and activate theoretical and critical thinking.

Although critical thinking may not necessarily be a gendered way of thinking, the journey to critical thinking may be different for women, particularly women with experience of being wives, mothers and workers. Belenky's study on women in higher education was the second study that was used to inform the way my group, mainly women in an FE college, learned. Belenky et al. (1986) found that the way women learn best is by listening to the stories of their peers, not just to listen to their opinions but to hear the journey they took to reach that opinion; to check out whether it had been tried and tested in circumstances which they considered held up to examination. This is why discussion was considered to be so important in their learning. This echoes Freire's understanding of the importance of what he called "conscientization" (Freire in Tight 1996: 101): it is not "the banking method of education" but "the problem-posing method dialogic" – it is constituted and organised by the student's view of the world, where their own generative themes are "found". Telling stories and posing problems within the students' occupational world was their way of learning. It is this development, and how best to effect it, that concerns this study.

Belenky's study (1986) described "frameworks of meaning making" examining how women talked about their learning. Their five developmental stages of learning are roughly similar to a study done on males at Harvard (often cited with Belenky's as a comparison) in that they start and end at roughly the same level of thinking (Tedesco 1991). What is different about the women's longitudinal study is that the language indicates a more intense interaction with the learning experience. The women went from a position of silence where they were "voiceless" and "mindless" and "subject to the whims of external authority" (Belenky 1986: 153) through received, subjective, procedural stages ending up with constructed knowledge. They became, what Belenky calls "connected knowers". She maintains that education which is conducted on the "connected model" (1986: 228) would help women towards a more powerful position. Belenky's students had an

> …experience of mutuality, equality and reciprocity that is most helpful in eventually enabling them to disentangle their own voice from the voice of others. (1986: 38)

The subjective knowledge, for the women, was described as "a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived as personal, private and subjectively known or

intuited" (1986: 153). The Belenky study on women learning suggests there is a development of a voice: a voice which suggests dialogue, interaction, audience and participation with others.

> The tendency for women to ground their epistemological premises in metaphors suggesting speaking and listening is at odds with the visual metaphors … that scientists and philosophers most often use to express their sense of mind …(Belenky 1986: 38)

While there are difficulties in interpreting metaphors (Chapter 6 deals with the use of metaphors as a research instrument) and with the assumption that scientists and philosophers are usually male, it does indicate that there may be a difference in the way that some women view their learning. The question remains though, whether we can compare like for like. Were Belenky's woman similar to my female students? In terms of socio-economic status, they were not, since a large part of her cohort attended private colleges. On the other hand, do some gender characteristics transcend class ones? Gender and class issues were ancillary considerations for my study: the majority were female and came from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds, although it would be fair to assume that they came mainly from the lower socio-economic groups. Those who gained a degree were the first in their family to do so and none of my students had parents with high qualifications. Belenky's study threw light on the way people who have been mis-represented or are unable to represent themselves, act and think. The link between class, gender, discourse and power became a pertinent aspect of this study.

A metaphor used to describe women returners was, "teaching women at the threshold stage" which came from the third influential study, *Women, Education and Training* (McGivney 1993: 61). This NIACE study examined factors which enabled progression to further learning for women returners. McGivney's list of factors (1993; 1996) helped inform the questionnaire and the interview questions. She ends her study with a plea for adaptation and flexibility, incorporating "elements which arise from experience, discussion and negotiation" (1993: 61). The metaphor of women being at the threshold stage resonated throughout: poorly qualified adult returners' understanding of embarking and being on the brink of new beginnings summed up both the cognitive and emotional aspects of the learning experience. It was also a metaphor which summed up the

intellectual activity that often occurred in the classroom. "Thresholds" came to acquire a meaning of journeys and new beginnings.

Feminist theories of learning also had relevance to aspects of the qualitative parts of the research and informed the methodology: life histories were part of the data which led to the meta-narrative providing rich biographical detail of each student's learning experience. Cameron's (1990) examination of feminist theories on discourse were also used to explore how language was used through talking about experience and narrating stories.

4.13 Social learning: the classroom as community

> Often it is the group which gives them the support, the ready ear, the sharing of experience, the humour to try the changes. The incidence of group support among women learners is striking…study is less difficult if skills are shared. (MacRae in McGivney 1993: 46)

The classroom as a community had been touched on in section 4.4 of this chapter: here it is used to describe group activity in learning. Studies on group and shared learning came from different sources. Some were concerned with adult returners, some with women and some with the connection between adult learning, communities of practice and classroom approaches. Resnick et al. (1991) provided the basis for this reading. Their articles on socially shared cognition showed that it was not just group activity but the nature of the activity and the composition of the group wherein that learning took place with shared inferences, discourses and practical understandings that made learning effective. Borrowing Bruner's (1986) ideas on communal learning and Lave and Wenger's (1991) on communities of practice and Bahktin's (Eagleton 1983) on dialogic interaction, it arrives at a set of theories on how learning takes place in a classroom where shared and reciprocal exchange takes place.

Salisbury and Murcott's study (1992: 573) pointed to gaps in this knowledge.

> …participatory processes in adult learning have been grossly neglected. As a result we have no data which show the routines and rituals of classroom life, know precious little

of the typical problems that may be peculiar to adult classrooms or the ways that teachers cope with, and resolve them.

"Routines and rituals of classroom life" were germane to my study in that they were another expression of the norms of the classroom, a product of social capital, which is discussed in the final chapter.

Staff development and training

Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges (Jan 2006) were used as guidelines to influence the teaching model in the final chapter. These standards, proposed by the Scottish Executive, were useful for comparative purposes.

Summary of Literature Review

To sum up, the main influences in this study were: participation studies, issues of lifelong learning, the definition of the "disadvantaged group" within this literature, the learning experience in relation to learner identity and the factors that make up a learning community. Central to the study was the sense of the transformation of the student through the learning experience. Field's work on social capital (2003) and how lifelong learning enhances citizenship was used to situate the transformatory nature of the learning into the larger picture of the students' lives. The participation studies were used to identify groups who were least likely to attend college and the issues that surrounded that non-attendance. They set the parameters for the initial enquiry into why the students succeeded when they came from the identified "disadvantaged group". Some of the literature was used to frame questions and interpret data (Weil's learner identity is an obvious example) and some of it was used as a foundation for developing the teaching model.

The gaps

Thus the gaps in the research that are relevant to this study appear to be: issues in further education and training; the quality of the teaching and learning experience, and the relationship of self-directed study and communal learning to this experience. More detailed knowledge of what students hope to get out of the learning experience was seen by Cross (1981) as requiring research. Gallagher et al (2000) recommends more research into non-traditional learners and the concept of a learning career and by implication, the

place of a learner identity within this. Hodkinson and James (2003) call for more research in FE on transforming cultures. Field (2003) also comments on the lack of knowledge of what learning means to these students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

My research started out with a broad hypothesis about learning based on observing students in the classroom. The same classroom experience that gave me the hypothetical hunch which was that the best learning takes place through discussion and group activity in a culture of supportive and critical thinking, also told me that learning is messy, unpredictable and elusive. While there are methodological difficulties in most research, one that tries to "capture" the process of learning is, perhaps, more vulnerable than others (Eraut et al. 2000: 240). The best approach appeared to be to allow the data to refine the hypothesis. While the nature of learning responds to a more all-embracing relationship with data, it is fallacious to assume that all data is freely collected, untampered by preconceptions. This pristine approach to data is even more questionable when the researcher is also the teacher.

The educational research reading on participation and lifelong learning told me that although large-scale surveys were useful for the bigger picture surrounding the aspects of teaching and learning, a more in-depth study was required here. This was to be a study of one course in one college using students who had attended that course over eight years. I had been their tutor and had taught some of them for three years, all of them for at least one. The aim here was to undertake a small study of the multi-faceted learning experiences of a group of students who had entered college with few qualifications.

Questionnaires (Appendix A) were posted out to 168 students who had been on the HNSLN course from 1995-2003 asking about their pre-entry qualifications, their priorities for success and the difference between college and school. The 95 responses were separated into the two groups of those with Highers and those without Highers and the results compared. To explore whether this similarity extended beyond the HNSLN course, a different course was given questionnaires and these results were compared with the HNSLN group. The similarities between all three groups were greater than had been hypothesised; in fact, there was only one meaningful difference between the Highers and Non-Highers groups. These findings were then used to inform two sets of

interviews for the HNSLN groups (Appendices C and D). Of the original group of 95 questionnaire respondents, 60 were interviewed. Three case studies were then selected from the Non-Highers group to show a more rounded picture of a learning career.

How did this relate to the research questions?

The questionnaire questions were designed to find out if there were any differences between those students with Highers and those without (the first research question) by asking them to state their priorities for success. They were then asked to compare their experience of school with that of college. As previously stated, the first research question was based on an assumption that the qualified students were different from those with few qualifications. This proved not to be the case: the similarities were far greater than the differences.

The students with no Highers were then interviewed to further investigate the quality of their learning experience (second research question). The third research question, which was concerned with the learning model, used the information gained from the questionnaires and the interviews with the Non-Highers group to establish some pedagogical principles. To make the learning model useful for all students, the students with Highers were interviewed primarily on the one difference found in the questionnaire between them and their less qualified peers.

Why were these methods chosen?

It was felt that a quantitative approach was necessary for the initial part of the study to establish some factual basis to attitudes to learning. While numerical data can often oversimplify and appear trivial, it was necessary to establish some categories of generality which act as springboards for the more detailed and idiosyncratic aspects of the learning experience. The questionnaire data was then used to inform the questions for the interviews so that the more complex areas of learning were dealt with qualitatively. While the strength of this study was its explorative and in-depth understanding of the individual learning experience, a different, more inclusive, approach was necessary for the learning model. This required a more thematic approach, drawing from theories of learning and "matching" them to the data.

Limitations and conflicts of interest

The limitations of this study are obvious. No safe generalisations can be drawn from such a small sample of 95 students on one course in one further education college. Extending the scope to include 27 students from a computing course in the same college to test one hypothesis did not enhance its prospects for representativeness. Generalisations would require a larger sample from several colleges across subject areas. (This is not to claim that large samples necessarily guarantee generalisability.)

While claims of representativeness are not appropriate for this type of study, as we are exploring complex relationships in depth, it behoves the researcher to address certain aspects of generalisability if the teaching model is to be taken as a serious outcome. A teaching model that is deemed appropriate in a small subject area only is not a model but a bespoke piece and, therefore, of limited use. The model has implications for policy and practice in further and adult education and as a dimension of lifelong learning.

It is difficult to find a one-to-one relationship between learning contexts. Particularities and generalities do have a loose relationship: individuals do behave in recognised patterns and classrooms do have identifiable dynamics, although the multi-faceted and elusive nature of learning makes it a tricky process to document. No exact match of mind, individual learning experience or classroom context will be found. However, findings can suggest similarities between different contexts and even single case studies can provide some representativeness (Dunmoyer 2000). The claim for my study is that the students exhibited patterns and the nature of patterns is that they are repetitive. It sought to establish a set of understandings and processes that made up a successful educational experience for some students on one course. In an ESRC funded longitudinal study of learning careers in further education, (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Hodkinson and James 2003) an argument is made for a case by case study, of specific sites with specific students, in order to gain an understanding of the diversity of experience while maintaining that each classroom in each subject area may require different learning approaches. While this ESRC research above adds to the authority of my in-depth small-scale study, a different paradigm is required for the universality of the learning model.

The research relationship

Another aspect of my study that has to be acknowledged is that the researcher was also the teacher. It is general practice in interviews that the interviewer should not be known to the interviewee to avoid bias (Hodkinson & James 2003). Data interpretation may have been affected by the knowledge I had of them as students. They may also have answered in a way to please the teacher. However, I would argue that knowledge of the interviewer, particularly where trust is involved, can lead to a more open interview. An unknown interviewer may be impartial and therefore avoid bias, but it may be to the detriment of the data collected. The advantage of prior knowledge as teacher perhaps made it easier to assess learning (or at least knowing the questions to ask to retrieve that learning) than it was for an interviewer meeting an interviewee for the first time.

Each interview was permeated by my knowledge of the interviewees' classroom personae and by their knowledge of me as a lecturer. This is a two-edged sword: on the one hand claims of bias could be justifiably levelled; on the other hand, it personalised the information and helped prompt further questions which were specifically relevant to each interviewee.

Areas for possible bias will be dealt with in detail in the interpretation of the data in Chapters 4 and 5. However, in general, the relationship between student and tutor, interviewee and interviewer, contributed to the validity of the data in that there was an element of trust involved in the interviews; this meant that students opened up and discussed, rather than answered, questions. Some of them did their thinking as they were talking. They knew there was no time limit and it didn't matter if they "rambled" or "wittered on" because this was accepted practice in the classroom. They were often encouraged in my class to keep talking until they arrived at a stage of understanding and a similar pattern of response was evident in some of the interviews. They showed an interest in the research process and two students asked to be interviewed together because they usually worked that way and thought it might produce better results for my research.

Just as you can't neutralise the social aspects of the interviewing process, the same is true of interpretation. The teacher's "eye" needed to be acknowledged. It would not

reflect reality if, as a teacher, I did not use my experience and expertise to inform the methodological approach.

> Personal and social forms of subjectivity are always present in research…On this view it follows that there are no methodological criteria for guaranteeing the absolute accuracy of research (quantitative or qualitative). (Coolican 1999: 467)

The interactive process in a semi-structured interview can make communication open both to bias and to rich and full description at the same time. It is difficult to say at what point the answers were perhaps influenced by my role as teacher in this interaction, although the researcher was conscious of this danger. At times, the role of teacher and that of researcher were in conflict. Since the instrumental part of the study was to be useful to teachers, I had to keep the teacher's purposes in mind, yet, at the same time, ensure the researcher's objectivity. This tension between different interests may have, in theory, given the study a better balance.

It could also be argued that the teacher and the researcher being the same person was a form of triangulation. As researcher I was constantly checking whether my results bore out a classroom reality. The researcher was checking with the practitioner. While this is, of course, an argument for bias, it could also be an argument for validity in seeking deeper understandings.

Using the respondents' real names and knowing some biographical details of each student allowed for a more personal and "inevitable locatedness" (Barr 1999: 5) that is present in all research. The real names also aided memory because I could locate the quotes through the voice. I could hear and see the person: this intimacy contributed to the contextualised nature of the study; it also substantiated an emerging theme in the interviews of the students' finding their voice through learning.

The Process
The literature
The reading indicated the lack of research in the learning process in further education, both in Scotland and England. There were many participation studies but few qualitative studies about the learning experience (see Chapter 2).

Using typologies

Reading on lifelong learning and participation helped to place this small group of students studying in the west of Scotland, into the larger, national picture. It was important to determine whether the students were representative of any other groups. If my respondents resembled other students in their educational history, or their social profile or their learning preferences, other research could be drawn on to establish a typology which could then be used to investigate the educational process on a more individual level through the interviews and case studies.

Participation studies by McGivney (1996; 1999; 2000) were used to situate these learners within a socio-economic context. Their profiles matched the adult learners studied by Gallagher et al (2000). Although not everyone in the group with no Highers was an adult returner, the majority of the questionnaire respondents was: 46 out of 54. These adult returners were typified as being women from lower socio-economic classes, unemployed, unqualified and, in some cases, lone parents – all categories stated in Fryer and Kennedy (1997) as under-represented in further and higher education. So while the sample in my study was too small to make valid generalisations, it did match students and study styles and preferences in other, larger studies.

Although the similarities in experience of other adult returners, the socio-economic parallels and the structural identities (representing the "under-represented") were useful for examining the larger debate on lifelong learning and inclusion that surrounded the research, it was the subtleties and nuances contained in the tracking of students' learning lives and individual response to learning that formed the main thrust of the investigation.

Testing theories

The literature review also indicated pertinent theoretical issues. Theories were used in the design of the interview and in the collection and analysis of the data. As discussed in Chapter 1, Bruner's (1986) theory of communal learning was used in the question: *Did you see learning as a "communal activity"?* Weil's (1986) idea that success depends on your learner identity, on how you define yourself as a learner, formed the basis of the question: *What does being a student mean to your definition of yourself?* These two questions were the only ones designed specifically to test out theories. Bruner's idea of

the students' belonging to a shared learning culture was germane to the question on learning experience. It is not just the idea of the making sense of information and ideas but that this making sense takes place within a shared culture. We will return to this idea in Chapter 9 where it is central to the learning model. Once the interviews had been analysed, social capital was used as a framework for thinking about the learning experience and its rewards because the student's comments, at times, appeared to be a direct confirmation of these theories on social capital.

The pilot

A pilot questionnaire was conducted with eight students during their last year of their HND. Apart from the obvious use of the pilot to iron out ambivalences and misunderstandings, the main concern here was to check whether the ten factors for success given in the questionnaire (see Appendix A) were the ones the students thought were the most significant.

Students with no Highers were selected for pilot interviews to determine the most effective form of recording both for the researcher and the participants. The interviewees expressed a degree of discomfort with a tape recording and preferred the researcher to take notes. Note-taking gave the interviewees time to think about the questions and made the experience "less intense". Although this method of recording was also preferred by the researcher, it is questionable whether it is as accurate as tape for actual words spoken. In order to quote accurately, the researcher read back the words to the interviewee and invited them to read the notes at the end to check accuracy.

This method meant that some degree of selection on the part of the interviewer was going on at the time of the interview. This could mean that the results may have lost the value of the reflective aspects of listening to a tape at a later date when more data had been collected and it could be seen in a rounder and richer context. Memory also plays a part: although my notes were extensive, there were times over the five years when I had to contact students to clarify issues. However, transcription of tapes is not without problems either. Arguments for taping versus note-taking were perhaps moot since the pilot study was to be an opportunity for the students to say what method they preferred. It seemed that their preferred method of note-taking would gain the best results.

Some modifications

The pilot highlighted two terms used in the interview which were problematic (see interview questions Chapter 5 page 99). What did the researcher mean by "success"? This was explained as gaining their qualification. The term "communal" was also one which caused hesitancy in some cases. Rather than change the wording of the question, since, for some students, there was a conceptual understanding of this term articulated by Bruner, the word "communal" was translated, where necessary, by the interviewer as "shared and group" learning.

The pilot study provided feedback on clarification of terms and collection preference (note-taking rather than taping) and it highlighted areas which required prompting and explanation. The questionnaire was amended and the interview schedule noted areas for explanation.

The questionnaires (see Appendix A)

The questionnaire sought to answer the first research question: *Is there a difference between the two groups, those with Highers and those without, in their priorities for success?* It was decided to use all students who were, or had been, on the HN Supporting Learning Needs course, years one and two, from 1995-2003. Students in the 2004 class were used in the pilot study. Data from the questionnaires was used to determine:

students with one or more Highers and students with no Highers;

what three factors contributed most to their success (10 were listed);

how the learning experience at college differed from that at school.

As previously stated, the purpose of the questionnaires was to determine two groups, those with Highers and those without; to define the main factors for success for each group; and to get a general understanding of what the issues for the students were in their own words. The 10 factors were determined by my teaching experience, and by participation studies (McGivney 1996; 1999), and then checked out in the pilot group. The factors (shown in bold throughout the study) were: **support from peers, support from staff, teaching methods, resources, assessments, practical placement, lecture content, personal organisation, life experience** and **increase in self-confidence** – in that order. In ordering the list of 10 factors the possibility of bias was reduced by putting low priorities from other studies in the middle.

The 95 respondents to the questionnaires were separated into two groups, the results of the two questions tabulated and then compared. Results from the first question, ***What do you consider to be the 3 most important factors in enabling you to succeed at college?*** were collated (see Appendix B for the raw data). First choices were noted in case a low general rating of a factor but a high amount of first choices, could be meaningful. This proved to be an important aspect in one of the factors, **practical placement,** which the respondents rated third overall, but with a low amount of first choices. This first question showed no significant difference between the students with Highers and those without.

The second question, ***How was the learning experience at college different from that at school?*** was designed to elicit some ideas not covered by the 10 factors in the first question. Although I was only marginally interested in their school experience, a comparative question is easier to answer than a general one on experience of learning. Although there was a section where they could add anything else to the 10 factors, a different question was required to allow them to reflect on the experience as a whole rather than seeing a learning experience as ten discrete elements. A comparison with school seemed to be the easiest way to do this.

Because the second question was open, some answers had to be categorised according to words and some according to meaning. For instance, the word *support* was used by many respondents but was meant in different ways. Some gave examples of practical academic feedback whereas others used *support* to mean encouragement. Once categories were established and the answers put into the two groups, results were compared. (Further analysis of the questionnaire results is contained in the following chapter where it is tied into the data.) The answers to this question showed only one meaningful difference between the two groups. So, one of the assumptions that Non-Higher students needed something radically different from the more qualified students, in terms of teaching approach, had to be re-considered.

At the outset, there was perhaps too much regard given to the usefulness of the information gained from the questionnaires.

For instance, one of the priorities for success was the motivation "*To get a better paid job*". This could be seen to represent a set of aspirations which indicate on a superficial level, a desire for more money only. There may also be a social aspiration, a desire to learn and a personal and intellectual aspiration to develop. These desires may not be a conscious motivation; what is clear is that these motivations are not revealed by survey-type methods (Harrison 1993). To reach a deeper understanding of the reasons for wanting to learn, interviews are required and, in the researcher's experience, it probably requires trust and understanding, using more exploratory methods than questionnaires to reveal that sense of self-knowledge.

Apart from establishing similarities between the two groups, the questionnaire was also helpful in determining the areas of importance to concentrate on in the interviews. The results from the two questions in the questionnaire were used to formulate themes for interview questions. For instance, when **teaching methods** was chosen as one of the top three priorities for success in the questionnaire, it substantiated the main research interest which was creating an effective learning classroom: a follow-up question on teaching methods was asked in the interview. The choice of **support from peers** in the questionnaire was transformed into an interview question on learning as a communal experience (see Chapter 5, page 99 for interview schedule).

Another course

Once the first research question had been answered and it was clear that these groups were similar, rather than different, it was decided to find out whether these similarities extended beyond this group to other student groups in the college. The idea of representativeness was looking more likely than at first thought. It was important that the end result of this study, the teaching model, could show applicability over a range of courses, rather than being restricted to one course.

It was decided to survey 27 students on a BSc Computing course in the college and compare their results with the HNSLN group. No-one in the HNSLN group gave **resources** as their first choice for factors affecting success. Ideally, a subject that relied heavily on resources would be useful in comparison. The computing course was chosen because it provided a good course contrast; it was male-dominated, heavily reliant on resources, with no practical placement, and used different learning approaches. Their

results confirmed those of the HNSLN group (all respondents) with **resources** replacing **practical placement**. The similarities between groups across two subjects were significant.

To answer the second research question: *What elements of the learning experience are important?* interviews were done with 35 students with no Highers and 25 of those with Highers. Three students were then selected for the case studies.

Triangulation was done in this study by using the first two questions of the interviews to corroborate the attitudes to learning found in the questionnaire. The students elaborated on the three factors that they chose for success: for example, all of them explained what they meant by **teaching methods** and **support from staff**. They also discussed the difference between school and college; this provided insight into their school experiences and also what many of them meant by "*being responsible for (their) own learning*".

The interviews: students with no Highers (see Appendix C)

Once the questionnaire data had defined the relevant issues, namely **teaching methods** and **support from staff**, an interview schedule was drawn up to reflect these, amongst others. There were three objectives: firstly, to explore answers from the questionnaire in more depth. Secondly, to examine theories of learner identity and communal learning; and finally, to determine how this learning experience had proved to be successful for them. Consequently, some of the questions were concerned with their learning pathways, attitudes to success and how systemic structures (one was chosen) outside the classroom enabled them to succeed. The data from the questionnaires were used to determine who had entered college with no Highers; 54 people qualified for interviews and 35 were interviewed.

Practical reasons such as where they lived or worked and how available they were, determined the choice. Six of the students refused saying there were too busy and some I had lost contact with since the questionnaire survey. Some were willing to be interviewed but could not travel to college nor was it appropriate for me to interview them at home or work. There was difficulty in finding a venue that did not intrude on the interviewee's privacy or cause them inconvenience. All interviews took place at various

intervals after the questionnaire: some students were interviewed months after and, for some, a gap of two years meant that I had to remind them of the questions in the postal survey at the beginning of the interview.

Thirty-five students with no Highers were interviewed. By the time I had interviewed 30, I felt that I had an in-depth picture of their learning. This "theoretical saturation" (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 61) was reached as the selection pool lessened and the researcher's knowledge increased. The interviews became less revelatory. Although the last five interviews required more time and effort, they yielded less satisfactory information. These five were busy people who could do telephone interviews only; the answers were more cursory and the information more perfunctory than that given in the face-to-face interviews. The temptation to do "just five more" until all possible respondents are "used up" is perhaps a reflection on how attitudes surrounding numerical data can drive the research but with no appreciable gain.

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted from half an hour up to an hour and a half. I devised a schedule of 10 questions but my intention was to allow the interviewees to talk freely and to use the questions as a focus: questions to ask when they ran out of words or to bring them back on topic. Deviation and drying up happened on very few occasions and mainly in the telephone interviews. In the main they answered fully, did not stray from the topic and often anticipated the questions so that, in some cases, it was a monologue with an occasional verbal "noddie" from me. It was easier to know where the student wanted to elaborate or where they were struggling to find the words which describe their thinking and feeling precisely in the face-to-face interviews. On the telephone, silences and other noises were difficult to interpret without seeing the attendant body language. Much of the information gained in the interview was dependent on knowing when the interviewee needed prompting or picking up on gestures indicating they had said enough or had said it in a way which was satisfactory to them.

Semi-structured interviews, unlike unstructured ones, can sometimes unintentionally close down some interesting points to pursue. Since most of my students had had experience in the classroom of expressing their views and following a train of thought, this potential closing down may have been less evident in this study. The parameters

(whether silent and invisible, or explicit) of the interview were probably more influenced by the relationship between my students and myself than the structure of the interview. Research by Bennett et al. (1996) corroborates this view of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

The first two questions of the interviews (both Highers and Non-Highers) were directly linked to the answers on the questionnaire. More detail was required. At times, although three choices had been given by all respondents, not all three were elaborated on. It is difficult to interpret things that are not mentioned. The dilemma for the interviewer using open questions like *In the survey you listed the 3 most important factors in succeeding at college as …Can you tell me a bit more about that?* is that if the interviewee chooses not to elaborate on one element, should the interviewer comment on this avoidance and thus "force" a comment or read something into the "non-comment"? This interviewer chose not to comment on factors chosen but not elaborated on, mainly for methodological reasons. The strategy was to allow the interviewees to determine what was important. The interviewer did, on occasions, attempt to address the "unmentioned" in order to cover all the bases and link the questionnaire to the interview. This was mainly concerned with teaching approaches that they found useful. The interviewer tried to press the interviewees into some detailed "list". This strategy proved to be unhelpful as most of the interviewees refused to be guided towards an answer and indicated that their omission in discussion was not an oversight but a deliberate choice in commenting on what they considered to be priorities.

Another factor in analysing the data came from Derrida's ideas cited in Chappell et al (2003) on the importance of the "unspoken" – people are defined as much by what they don't say as by what they say. The omissions, the questions that were "skirted" around and those that were answered indirectly, were all noted. When it came to the interpretation, at times this interpretation did not go beyond the descriptive as it is difficult to find conclusive evidence in silence.

What may be relevant is that no-one said, "I don't know" to any of the interview questions and the answers were delivered confidently and without hesitation. By this I mean that there was a certainty and clarity in their thought, although at times they did

hesitate in searching for expression. The overall impression of all the interviews was that the ex-students had done a lot of thinking about the course prior to the interviews.

The interviews: students with Highers (see Appendix D)

To add to the data collected from the Non-Highers group on the quality of learning, and to fulfil the requirements of inclusivity of the learning model, 25 students with Highers were interviewed. Since there was only one meaningful difference between the two groups in their responses to the questionnaire, the interviews with this group concentrated on that. 17 out of the 41 respondents with Highers gave the main difference between college and school as *"being responsible for your own learning"*. Interviews were then conducted with 25 ex-students with Highers. (This number was the same proportion of the larger survey group as that of the Non-Highers.) There were three questions only in this set of interviews. They lasted for about 20 minutes and were all done face-to-face. The interviews concentrated on an explication of the three factors for success given on the questionnaire and the main concern of being responsible for their own learning. This triangulation was done to confirm the similarities found between the two groups in the questionnaire.

The interviews: the analysis

It was important not to lose sight of the major elements in the study. It was also important to note any other ideas that made a contribution to the story of their learning. The interviews were given an impressionistic reading. They were then analysed question by question, for frequency and intensity of language, contradictions, use of metaphor and whether the active or passive voice was used. Similar responses were counted and one-off comments were also noted. Examples from the classroom were noted in detail because they were useful in giving a sense of context. They were categorised into themes and given a final reading where the questions were "ignored". A question by question reading was useful for specific themes and testing of theories (referred to earlier in this chapter) but I could not grasp the fullness of the experience through this type of reading and categorising; so the interviews were given a third reading to gain the full understanding of each interviewee's narrative. It gave an indication of what broad themes and issues were emerging "outside" the interview schedule; ones that the individual voices were expressing. This final reading presented differing pictures of

students who had a learning career, who had changed in their attitudes and thinking and who were able to connect their learning with their life.

Discourse and narratives: listening to voices

> Neither biology nor information science has improved upon the story as a means of ordering and storing the experience of human and clinical complexity. Neither is likely to. Narrative as a human activity is in part intended to provide its listeners with a widened, vicarious experience; and that experience is memorable precisely because it is necessarily enmeshed with past and future, cause and consequence. (Hunter 1991: 76-77)

As an English teacher it comes naturally for me to listen to voices and analyse how these voices express a truth. Thus narrative was an obvious direction for me to take in this research. Establishing an ontological meaning through the language used by the students fitted into the study both methodologically (how the language we use tells us about the way we relate to experience) and in terms of praxis (how the language of a classroom relates to learning and teaching). To justify narrative as a methodology is to see story making as sense making. The interpreter's task is to see the sense of the story through the language analysis.

> The assumption of "good reasons" and "deep sense" is foundational to discourse analysis. It is based, as well, on the viewpoint that humans are, as creatures, sense makers par excellence. (Gee 1999: 79)

Hodkinson and James (2003) in their study *Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education* use Bruner's definition of learning and thinking as "situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utility of cultural resources" (Bruner 1996: 4). These cultural resources are ones that the students bring to class, live with, and acquire, during their years at college. We will return to these in the final chapter. Central to my study was the understanding that learning is social and situated and that the methodology that was most apt in demonstrating this was a qualitative approach which allowed the students to tell their own stories and, as far as possible, in their own words.

There was a group of students who appeared to be very "quotable". Their powers of reflection and critical thinking may have been greater than the others or it may be that their personal experience, both post- and pre-college, had afforded them a deeper perspective. They might have had a richer oral dimension within their upbringing or culture. (One of the reasons for choosing two of the case studies is that they showed different levels of linguistic aptitude and sensitivity.) Whatever the reason for this "quotability", there were voices which resonated more frequently with my ideas or learning theories. I found myself saying, "Bruner/other theorists would agree with that" in the interviews or, when reading literature on education, "Student A said that too." The concordance found in the echoes was striking although, perhaps, to be expected, since their knowledge of learning theories was greater than the average student. While they may have made comments on the learning experience which were broadly similar in ideas to Bruner, they did not *sound* like Bruner (that is, they did not use his phraseology). Hence there was a greater inclination to believe that the ideation was not due to pedagogical knowledge but gained through lived experience. The researcher trusted it as an authentic representation of their own understanding.

"Tracing voices" (Mauthner & Doucet 1998: 134), as compared to reducing data to themes and metaphors, was found to be useful because the way they "stored and ordered" (Hunter 1991: 76) their experiences was a transformatory process. Their story was transmitted in their own voice. "Transforming private stories into public theories" (Mauthner and Doucet 1998: 119) meant listening carefully when reading back the notes. How their story reflected the main issues was the first priority but an openness to issues dictated by their storyline was also required. Translating interviews to notes to theories may lose and gain along the way, particularly when the researcher's voice-over may be louder. It was necessary to leave space for their expression as well as fitting them in to my and the others' interests (what Mauthner and Doucet 1998: 134 call "tuning our ear"). Listening out for the different roles the student took on when they were being interviewed required concentration. The individual student had a sense of being a member of a group. They used *we* and spoke of the *class*, referring to their fellow students. Seeing their experience as both individual and as a member of a group meant that there were many implicit references to the communal learning theories that the research was exploring.

Reading each interview and ignoring the questions was useful because it caught the off-topic comments more accurately. These comments proved to be illuminating in terms of the questions not explicitly asked. Listening to them as the narrator, rather than the respondent to 10 questions, enabled me to listen out for the student's own way of constructing their experience which was, in some cases, different from the way it had been done in the interview questions. Individual voices often spoke for the group by summing up with an apt comment what the others had been struggling to say. In a thesis which has a teaching/learning model as its outcome, it is important to hear the individual cry as well as the group rumble.

Due to my knowledge of them as students, I think there was some certainty in my interpretation of their meaning, their "deep sense". However, like all data interpretation this was a certainty over which I exercised caution. Where I was uncertain of the meaning or I had forgotten what my notes meant, I contacted the students to clarify. As the recorder, interpreter and editor of their stories, I found details of situations, simple explanations of who was involved and where (the canteen seemed to be a particularly fruitful place for learning) contributed to the overall understanding of the context of the learning experience. One explanation of this was that, since learning is mostly invisible and takes place inside the mind, it was helpful to have some visual, concrete references to offset the more ethereal ideas. Examples from classroom practice were abundant and where the interviewee illustrated their meaning through actions of particular students and circumstances, these were recorded in full. This was not to disclose confidences but to show the context from which the thinking came: what Denzin (1994: 506) describes as "contextual, situated understandings."

The negotiation of the world through language has a flexible and mutable character responsive to contexts like classrooms and workplaces. Meanings that are in a constant state of negotiation may be tiring, confusing and not compatible with quantitative methods but their interactive nature makes them more valid in the shifting world of learning.

A question of style: hearing and recording the students' voices
The difficulties of discourse and its relationship with research accounts proved to be a question of appropriate style. Standard research writing styles (scientific objectivity as

exemplified by the passive voice, non-metaphorical language, no subjectivity) were not considered adequate in expressing the richness of lived experience. The researcher/author told a multi-voiced story and let the participants speak for themselves. Many quotes from the interviews were used, particularly if the students used idiosyncratic expressions and less conventional language, like metaphors. The chosen style of this study needed to be receptive to the representation of the students' stories. The author/researcher is aware that this more personal choice of writing style often strengthens criticisms of qualitative research as unrepresentative (subjective in style) woolly (vocabulary is ambiguous and metaphoric in its use of imagery in general) and subject to bias (personal voice, "character" intrusion).

These criticisms are perhaps less persuasive when trying to make explicit a process so implicit as learning. There were many instances during the interviews when the students appeared to reach an understanding of their college experience which the interview questions had illuminated. To sum up two to three years of learning, often with an intervening gap of two years, was a complex task. It did not lend itself to deductive, summative types of comments. The language reflected the iterative nature of this exercise.

The use of metaphor

Interviewees used metaphors to explain the more difficult to define areas of the learning process. This was mainly restricted to one question on how the quality of teaching had an effect on their learning experience, although a few interviewees used them throughout the interview. Therefore it was decided to look at metaphors in the interpretation of the interviews. Since these students were normally plain speaking, some meaning could be attributed to their adoption of a different linguistic expression in relation to certain aspects of the interview. Perhaps more importance was given to this use of metaphor because of the researcher's interest but it could also be that the use of metaphor, because it was "automatic and effortless", indicated a fluency and artlessness, as well as a sharing of linguistic referents.

> A metaphor is conventional to the extent that it is automatic, effortless, and generally established as a mode of thought among members of a linguistic community. (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 55)

Metaphors were not used in the interview questions although they probably were used by the interviewer in comments and prompts. Even without a detailed understanding of how a metaphor works, the use of a metaphor indicates an assumption that the user and the listener are, somehow, in accord. It assumes, in an interview session, that both participants are, to some extent, engaged in the same frame of reference. This has implications for the methodology in that the research could both gain and suffer from this mutuality. It could mean that the interviewer gained more detail and in-depth information because the respondent was at ease with the subject and the context. On the other hand, it could mean that the interviewer made too many assumptions about shared understandings and did not question in a thorough enough manner. It was decided that the benefits outweighed the difficulties. It was the interviewer's feeling (and it can be no more than intuitive) that where metaphor and idiom were used by the respondents, it indicated a depth of thought and understanding.

One of the main concerns was to replicate the interviewees' comments so that the story was told in their words. The use of metaphor indicates a particular way of thinking about an idea; processing ideas and then expressing them in metaphoric language indicates a personal, individualistic grasp of an idea – not just any idea, but the students' own ; "idiosyncratic thought requires idiosyncratic language" (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 50). So, although the interviewees may have expressed similar thoughts at times, by using particular modes of speech, they created the small differences and nuances that enhanced the individual experiences within the study. Conventional language, easier to code, has a uniformity to it which was not always useful in a more subjective context of learning.

There is a detailed explanation of the use of metaphor in data analysis in Chapter 6 where it can be seen together with the examples of the students' metaphors.

Counting responses

A problem that arose was counting the responses in the interviews. Was it contradictory to lay claims to rich data from a small sample and then to count the responses? While the main function of the interviews was not to see how representative of students (everywhere) the responses were, it was, nevertheless, important to see whether they were representative of the 54 students without Highers who had answered the survey.

Numerical data do not give you an in-depth picture of such organic events as learning but it does help to clarify the events which are quantifiable that surround that learning experience. It told me what many students, as distinct from the few, thought about this process. While it did not amount to "aggregating a set of individual experiences into typologies" (Gorard and Rees 2002: 17), it did show that responses were similar and, looking ahead to forming a teaching model, it was a half-formed impression that types of similar students could "fit" into a set of approaches. (This thinking was mis-informed, as indicated by the students.) It also helped to show the dual nature of what might be called "rogue" data. What might be considered difficult data which doesn't fit the theoretical picture, in quantitative terms, is almost a desirable effect in qualitative ones.

The use of theories

Two constructs were used in the interviews: "learner identity" (Weil 1986: 223) and "communal learning" (Bruner 1986: 127). These constructs were not made up by myself, although perhaps they assumed a legitimacy to the interviewee by my use of them. By adopting a position based on these constructs, it was necessary to be guarded against fitting the data to the theory. Because these two concepts formed the basis of my hypothesis about effective learning, the interviews were trawled for information which would fit into these two themes. The two questions designed to elicit information on the two constructs had different results. One set of answers from the question on learner identity was focused and revealed much data. The other question on communal learning slid off into side-tracks and wildly different interpretations; I thought the students had not understood my meaning or the meaning of the construct. It was due to these "misunderstandings" that I decided to give a final, more holistic reading to everyone's interviews. This final reading enable me to listen to, and out for, the voices that seemed to tell a more complete story. What appeared at first sight as tangents, were, in fact, insightful and germane comments.

At the same time as I was focusing on testing theories, I was also listening out for anything that would deepen my understanding of their learning. It was focused and wide-eyed at the same time. Dey (1993) describes grounded theory process as contrasting one bit of datum with another, affixing it to categories, substantiating it with existing theories and then using this to generate new theories. The category fixing in my study was loosely structured by the interview questions; theories of learning were used

to explicate and substantiate the data. New theories did evolve from existing ones but this does not appear to be anything different from what happens in all research. How this grounded theory process was useful for my research was in an understanding that "problems" with the data meant that the direction of the research journey was only vaguely mapped out. If it threw up obstacles, it was almost written into the process that these were necessary for changing direction and that it was these unplanned-for re-routings that enriched the findings.

Case histories: 'Restorying' the individual

Once the interviews had been analysed, the final stage in the process was the selection of the case histories. Three students were chosen as case studies. They all came to college with no Highers, one had eight Standard Grades, another had one and one of the adult returners had no qualifications at all. All went on to gain degrees. They were aged between 16 and 39 when they started the course. So, in terms of age, qualifications and success, they represented the Non-Highers' group. In other ways, they were individual.

The three cases were used to illustrate themes in Chapter 8 and the chapter on learner identity. The case studies were put into these sections, instead of at the end of the interviews, because these were the more theoretical parts of the study. It was a useful device to show how these ideas could be seen in the lives of students rather than remaining at the theoretical level. Although these chapters were informed by the data from all the interviewees, it made sense to use these three studies as examples because reference to them was more compact than re-quoting many students as evidence.

The three case studies were sent life story outlines and were asked to comment, rewrite or make amendments. I chose to write their story from notes taken during the interview and knowledge I had of them as students rather than ask them to write it from scratch as all three were busy at new jobs or still studying. Strictly speaking, to justify my argument for case studies, it would have been more authentic had they written them themselves. Two of the students emailed me with additional information and the third came into college for another informal interview. All three corroborated my story of their stories. On first considering case studies, the question comes to mind, what do they tell that the interviews didn't? How did the holistic impression of the student provide an insight over the more fragmented, theme-based approach of the interview?

Arguments for case studies are well documented (Stake 1995) and they fit into the methodology of this study in that they provide an in-depth, rich description of the learning experience. The case studies could be seen as the final stage of a whittling down process, reducing the group size down to the individual. As a member of a sub-group which had been treated in a general and a comparative way, was there any point in creating another sub-group of three? If we see case studies as both representative and rogue at the same time, it could seem as if the narratives are competing with each other. The question was how to make sense of the learning as both a group and an individual experience. The narrative of the case studies had a different structure to the narrative of the 35 interviews. Their stories were more personal and analytical; they chose to concentrate on more social aspects of their experience, aspects that the interview questions had only hinted at. Their emphasis on relationships with staff and peers, the transformation in their self-concept and what a second chance meant for them, emotionally and socially, were similar concerns in all three case studies.

Reviewing all 60 interviews (both Highers and Non-Highers) it appeared that the students' story of their experience had been artificially divided up into ten questions and answers. Some of the themes and ideas were better served by a chronological narrative which the case-studies provided. (For example, change in the learner identity was best seen in a story with a timeline.) Once deconstructed, it seemed important to reconstruct them as whole people with timelines and chronologies of their own: in short, to present their narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end. This is what Hunter (1991: 10) calls the "hermeneutic circle".

> The part must be recontextualized, considered again as part of the whole. In the process the patient will be reinvested in a narrative, restored to medical discourse, re-storied.

Although Hunter is discussing medical diagnosis and patients who become cases through medical investigation, the same reconstructive process makes sense in this narrative-based research. It seemed important to reconstruct the interviewees as "whole" people who fitted into the context of the classroom. One story can be filtered through a set of other stories and theories and can become a representative case. Themes from the group evidence also resided in different ways within the case studies. Rather than

construct my version of their educational life story, it seemed more methodologically sound and more genuine to ask them to construct themselves. Although I wrote the story, they had control over its contents.

Case studies are raised above the level of anecdote, not just because they provide thick description but because the stories have been filtered through two interpreters: the participant and the "participant" researcher. The original story has been superseded by the interpretation: "Its details now support a new set of meanings" (Hunter 1991: 131). The person now becomes a case study, the single instance adding to the human variety. Credibility is given to experience that has been constructed and then reconstructed: the participant says, "this is my story of my story which has now become partly your story of my story".

The learning model

Using the data from the interviews and to a lesser extent, the questionnaire, and the life story of the three individuals, it was necessary, to extrapolate themes and generic issues to build up a larger picture again for "the model". At this point it became clear that the data was telling me that a neat bullet-point model would not represent the students' ideas. This will be re-examined in Chapters 4 and 5.

Ethical considerations

The interviewees were asked if their real names could be used and whether they could be quoted. The use of their real names was important for the researcher/teacher because, apart from pseudonyms causing more confusion than protecting identity, the association of the name to the story gave it a personal connection for the author. While this would have no significance for the reader, it did enhance the veracity for the writer. Whether this affected the language used in writing up the research and the reflective stance would be an engaging topic for a more linguistically oriented study. The interviewees had the opportunity to verify the notes and withdraw permission at any time. The three case studies were all asked to sign a permission slip and they were sent copies of their case study to verify.

On reflection

Good students make good interviewees. In some ways the interview process mirrored that of the classroom. The principles of critical thinking, reflection and conditional learning (all discussed in the final chapter) were all exhibited by the interviewees. Trust and reciprocity, norms of the classroom, were also evident in the interview. The learning experience had, to some extent, influenced the conditions for effective interviews.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS 1: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire (Appendix A) asked for information on students' previous qualifications (Standard/O Grades and Highers or equivalent) and the year they achieved their HN qualification. 163 questionnaires were posted out to former students and there were 68 replies. The rest of the questionnaires (27) were done in the college with the HNSLN students, eight of whom constituted the pilot study. This made a total of 95 completed questionnaires.

The main aims of the questionnaire were to sort the respondents into two groups, those with Highers and those with no Highers on entry to college, and to find out their priorities in terms of learning and the similarities and differences between the two groups. This comparison was required so that the teaching model was fit for these two types of students.

Question 1 of the questionnaire:

What do you consider to be the 3 most important factors in enabling you to succeed at college?

The students were given 10 elements of college experience which contribute to the learning process, with an option to add anything they chose. These 10 elements were chosen from the teacher's observation and experience and used in the pilot study where they were discussed with the students. They were then compared to those McGivney (1996) used in her research on adult learning. Both the discussion with the pilot group and the comparison with other research confirmed the suitability of the 10 factors affecting success. Although percentages used with such small numbers can be misleading, the comparison between the two groups (see Figure 1) had to use percentages because the number of respondents was different in each group. Elsewhere, because the sample is small, numbers are used. The raw data for these percentages can be found in Appendix B.

Highers and Non-Highers: comparison of the two groups

The first research question, *What made second chance learning a success?* set out to compare the attitudes to learning between the two groups: the results of the questionnaire were divided into the two sub-groups of those with Highers and those with no Highers. Of the 95 respondents to the questionnaire, 41 had Highers (1 or more), 54 had no Highers.

Bold is used for the 10 factors in the first question of the questionnaire and the respondents' words used in the second question are in italics.

As discussed previously, there is a correlation between those having Highers and school leavers and also between those with no Highers and adult returners. It is safe to assume that the majority of the Non-Highers group has had less recent school experience than the Highers group as all but eight of the 54 students were over 20. 23 out of 41 respondents with Highers were under 20. It is also safe to assume that the entire group of Non-Highers would have had less schooling in total than those in the Highers group. The more mature students would also have had more work experience than the school leavers. Age, and in what decade they went to school, were factors which affected the interpretation of the questionnaire data.

Figure 1: What do you consider to be the 3 most important factors in enabling you to succeed at college?

Factor	Non-Highers	Highers
support from staff	65%	46%
teaching methods	43%	63%
practical placement	33%	51%
support from peers	30%	24%
lecture content	30%	32%
life experience	30%	10%
personal organisation	28%	17%
increase in self confidence	26%	22%
resources	9%	24%
assessments	7%	10%

■ Non-Highers □ Highers
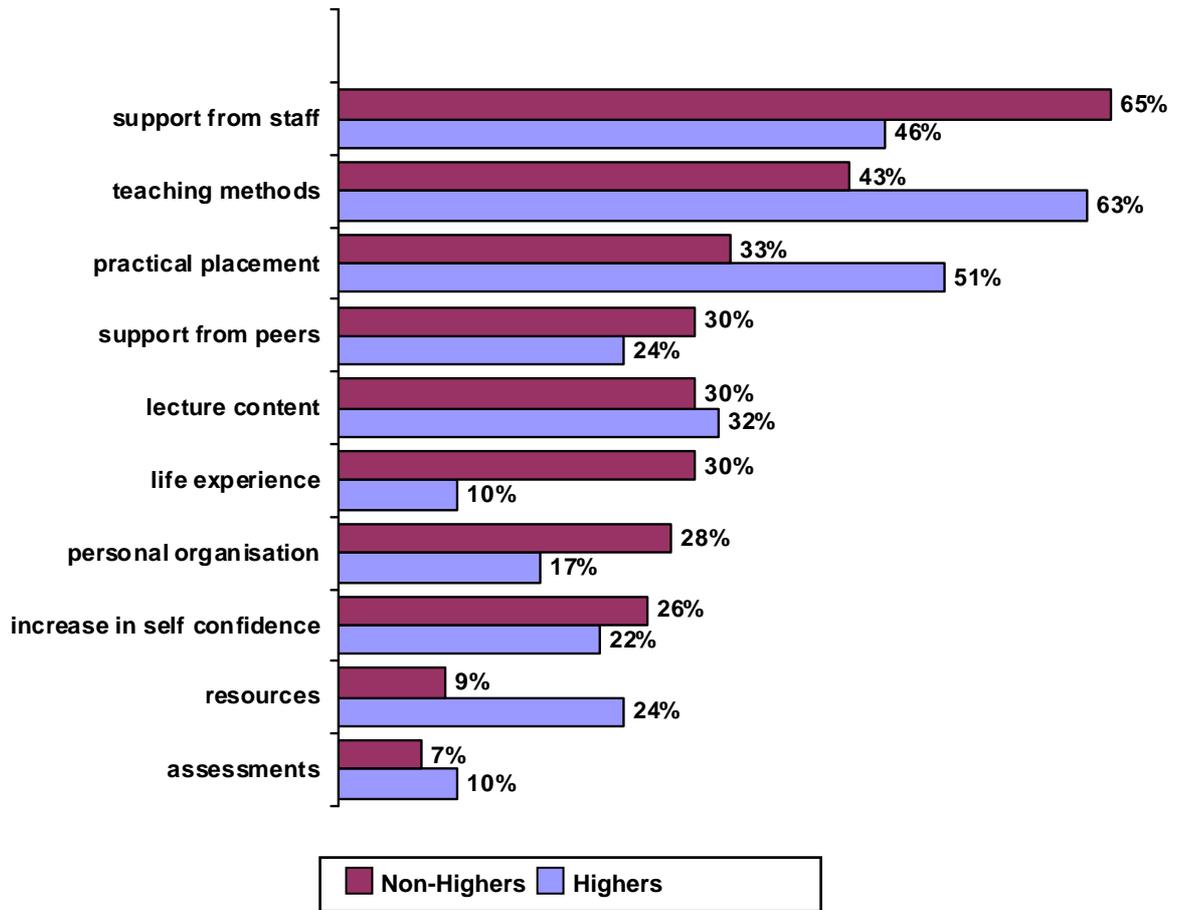
As can be seen from the graph above, the first three factors for success were the same for both groups, although they were given a different order of priority. Those students with no Highers stated that **support from staff, teaching methods** and **practical placement** were the most important factors affecting their success. Those respondents with Highers chose the same three but in a different order: **teaching methods, practical placement** and **support from staff.** Sixty-five percent of the Non-Highers group chose **support from staff** as their first priority. They valued the input from staff perhaps because they were unused to that degree of support. This could have been that, since the Non-Highers tended to be more mature, they had not received the benefit of classroom support as classroom assistants are a relatively recent addition to schools, or because they were considered less able, they had not received the support they considered necessary. **Support from staff** was rated by only 46% of the Highers because perhaps classroom support was not so unusual for those younger students with Highers or, because they had been successful at school, they felt they did not need the support as much as those with

no Highers. Sixty-three percent of those students with Highers chose **teaching methods** as their most important factor. The Highers' group rated **practical placement** significantly higher than those with no Highers. An explanation for **practical placement** being given a higher rating by those with Highers could be that those with Highers tended to be school leavers who had had less experience in the job market; learning through work was new to them. Those without Highers were mature students, some of whom had worked in this area so were less likely to see it as novel, although the importance of practical placement should not be underestimated in their case as it was rated third by 33%.

Support from peers was chosen by 24% of those with Highers, but 30% of those without Highers. There was a high percentage of first choices for this factor from both groups. **Lecture content** was rated almost equally by both groups (30% and 32%). The Highers' group found **life experience** the least important of the 10 factors (10%) rating it as low as **assessments**. At 16+ you could probably not claim very much life experience. **Life experience** and **personal organisation** were given a higher priority by the Non-Highers adult returners perhaps because they tended to be older and have families.

Increase in self confidence was given approximate equal rating by both groups being slightly higher in importance for those with no Highers, possibly due to their low starting base: they may have been responding to the **increase** part of the phrase. Although self-confidence affects performance, and teaching and learning cannot be separated from this quality, it is a factor that the lecturer and peers have less control over. Confidence is often an individual quality and while success can increase self-esteem (Emler 2001) it is also dependent on many other factors. The similarities between the two groups appeared to be related to the learning experience and what happened in the classroom.

Resources and **assessment** came last on the Non-Highers' students' list of priorities for success; **resources** were considered to be almost twice as important as **assessments** for the Highers but the Non-Highers rated them equally with **assessments**. It is interesting that **assessments** scored last on the order of importance for both groups as teaching staff in college spend a lot of time developing and preparing for assessments. A possible reason for the Highers' students seeing **resources** as more important was that, since they

were generally younger, they were more computer literate and one of the library resources was computers. Also the college library stock would have been more extensive than the library at school. However, the low rating of **resources** (for the Non-Highers) is not surprising since the Campaign for Learning (1998) found that most people rate IT low in terms of its usefulness as a learning tool and even practical learners preferred to learn through books and lectures (Field 2000: 99).

It is important to note that **resources** was not defined (it could have meant human or material) and although no-one questioned its precise meaning, the pilot discussion indicated that the respondents' understanding concurred with that of the researcher's. What was meant by resources were those physical resources such as library books and journals, computers and teaching materials used in class. Since **support from staff** was given as one of the 10 factors, it is probable that they interpreted that resources did not mean human resources. Whatever the understanding of resources, it has to be on record that the low rating may be a result of a lack of precision on the part of the researcher rather than it having been given serious consideration by the respondents. It is worth noting that no-one in the pilot study nor anyone who answered the questionnaire in class asked for a precise explanation of resources. Not being sure what an option means may be a reason for low rating: the fact that no-one asked for clarification may have meant that other options were more readily identifiable as important.

First Choices

Although first choices were noted in the raw data, they did not appear to indicate much except in the case of **practical placement** which, although it was in the top three for both groups (rated second for Highers and third for Non-Highers), only six people overall gave it as their first choice. This could have indicated that it was not the primary learning context for these students. On a vocational course the expectation would be that this practical element would have been rated more highly. **Support from peers** was given by 14 students as first choice so, although this factor was chosen by only 24% of those with Highers and by 30% by those with no Highers, it was significant for those 14. There were no first choices for **resources** and only two for **assessments,** substantiating the lack of importance placed by the students on these last two factors.

Although an awareness of the primacy of teachers, peers and pedagogy was surfacing, this scale rating could not tell me much more than that the two groups were roughly agreed as to the importance of **support from staff, teaching methods, practical placement, support from peers, lecture content, increase in self confidence** and **assessments.** As expected, the two groups were different in their rating on **life experience; resources** also indicated a difference and to a lesser extent, **personal organization.** So, the first question indicated a similarity between the two groups in all the areas that were germane to this study.

Question 2: How was the learning experience at college different from that at school?

This open question was designed to encourage the respondents to use their own words to select essential elements of the college experience. This was to establish whether they had different perspectives from the one given to them in question one. It could be said that their comments on the second question were more indicative of the factors which made them successful because they had freedom of choice rather than the 10 factors prescribed by the researcher in question one. The students were asked about the difference between school and college experience for reasons given in the methodology section. Like question one, its aim was to see what the respondents considered important in the learning process and how the two groups compared.

The second question substantiated, refined and gave different perspectives to the first question. It was designed to give a wider perspective than question one by not tying the learning to the narrow confines of success. There were some interesting omissions (no-one mentioned the compulsory aspect of school) but there were no apparent contradictions. The difficulty in interpreting the answers and their relationship to the first question lay in the word "different" which was deliberately not value-laden. At times, their wording left me in no doubt whether it was a positive or negative difference.

The comparison with school showed a high degree of similarity between the Highers and the Non-Highers groups. There were four differences (although only one meaningful one) in the answers between the two groups and the explanation probably lies within the period they went to school and the type of school regime they experienced. Strictly

speaking percentages should be used to make comparisons between two groups of different amounts. However, as the table will reveal, percentages would have made little difference to understanding where the numbers are insignificant in a statistical sense. There was only one answer (in bold) which indicated percentages would be meaningful.

As the second question was open ended, free choice of phrasing led to some possible duplication of meaning. In coding the raw data, every expression was logged and then some of the answers were subsumed under one heading where it was thought the main idea was similar but the words were different. An example of this is "in charge of" and "responsible for". Where there was the use of the same word (eg. "support") but there was ambiguity in the meaning, as in "we got more support in college" and "the lecturers were supportive", they were put in different categories.

Table 2: *How was the learning experience at college different from school?*

Responses	Highers	Non-Highers
Interest in subject, choice of curriculum	0	11 (20%)
Relaxed, informal, laid-back	0	9 (17%)
You were treated as an adult	5	8
Student centred – more involvement from students/group discussion	2	7
Better relationship with lecturers, more approachable/supportive	7	7
Increased confidence	0	6
Recognised as an individual / more respect	5	6
In charge of / responsible for own learning	**17 (41%)**	**6 (11%)**
Motivation, willingness to learn (attributed to maturity)	2	5
More encouragement, praise	0	4
Allowed to think independently, give opinions, develop own ideas	6	4
Flexible and negotiable	0	3
Real life experience	3	2
Life experience plus learning in college	0	1
Active learning	1	1
Time allowed	1	1
Suitable pace	1	0
Greater sense of achievement	1	0
More support	2	0

The highest number of respondents (17 students with Highers and 6 with no Highers) thought that the difference between school and college was that you were "*in charge of or responsible for your own learning*". I could not attribute any value to this comment;

there was no indication whether this was a painful or a pleasant difference in experience. Interpreting this autonomy and responsibility became the main focus of one set of the interviews.

The second most cited difference between school and college was *the better relationships* with lecturers in that they were "*more approachable*" and "*supportive*" than teachers in school. This could be seen as related to the next most given factor in that the respondents said they were "*treated as an adult*". "*To be responsible for your own learning*" is also being treated as an adult. "*Relaxed, informal and laid back*" was quoted by 9 of the Non-Highers respondents. (The word "*relaxed*" was also used frequently in the interviews.) In reviewing the results from the second question it was useful to separate the factors over which teaching staff had little control (that is, what the student brought to the classroom) and those which were influenced by the institution. Five of the students said that "*real life experience*" made college different, presumably referring to the placement element of the course. For the Non-Highers group, "*increased confidence*" was given by 6 of the students but almost twice as many said there was "*interest in the subject*" (11). We may surmise that interest is a strong element in college learning and overrides the more personal qualities (**life experience** and **personal organisation**) that they bring with them to college. If they don't have the desire to learn more about a particular subject, then their life experience and confidence in themselves may not have been enough to bring them back to college. They were there to learn something specific, not just "to go back to college".

The two factors that were directly related to teaching and learning were that college was "*student-centred*" and there was "*more involvement from students*". Some explained this involvement as "group discussion" (7 of the Non-Highers and 2 of the Highers) and both groups said that they were "*allowed to think independently, give opinions and develop own ideas*". Two people used the term, "*active learning*". These answers do give the impression that the learning experience is about the development of the students' thinking rather than just the taking on board of taught information. It also implies an ideology which encourages independence and self-directed study. Using the word "*involvement*" with student-centred and group discussion implies an engagement with the learning process through their peers. Independent thought and giving opinions may imply either a previous repression of such things, ("*allowed*" certainly indicates a higher

authority giving permission) and that college is seen to be relatively liberal in encouraging this, or, perhaps more importantly, giving opinions and thinking for oneself was seen as an expression of learning. The student who used the word *"allowed"* was a school leaver with no Highers. It was not indicated whether the independent thinking was expressed through talking or writing and this difference may have been irrelevant, although it would have been useful to know how and when this development occurred. *"Being recognised as an individual"* and *"treated with more (than school) respect"* (given similar rating by both groups) suggest that there was an impact of interpersonal and interactional skills on classroom ethos. It is interesting that the two highest factors, *"responsibility for own learning"* (23 overall) and *"better relationship with lecturers who were more supportive"* (14 overall) are not seen as conflictual. It is no more than educated guesswork to assume that the lecturers supported them towards a more independent and self-directed way of learning.

The significant difference between the two groups was concerned with responsibility for learning. Of the 23 respondents who gave the difference between college and school as *"responsible for own learning"*, 17 (41%) of those were in the Highers group compared to 11% of the Non-Highers group. It could be that if they were recent school leavers, they had seen this as the responsibility of the teacher, the school or perhaps their parents. *"In charge of"* implies an internal authority; perhaps this is the first experience they have had of ownership of that learning and having to show self-discipline in organizing their work and meeting deadlines.

The second difference between the two groups was about *"interest in the subject"*; this was cited by 11 students (20%), all from the Non-Highers group. An explanation for this may be that this older generation may not have had the options that younger students have. This statement about interest probably said more about the school curriculum as it existed when they went to school. Younger students were used to a wider curriculum choice and some school work experience.

The third notable difference in the two groups was the response that college was *"relaxed, informal, laid-back"*. All nine (17%) respondents were from the Non-Highers group. It is possible that school failures may have perceived the school regime to be more authoritarian than those who were deemed capable enough to stay on and take

Highers, or were treated differently than those who passed exams. Perhaps the prevalent use of these terms by the more mature students was more a reflection of the more authoritarian regimes they encountered in school which prevail less in schools today.

Using the results from the second question of the questionnaire it is possible to construct a profile of the two groups. The Non-Highers group regard an interest in the subject as paramount. They see college as relaxed and informal and we can assume they like to be treated as adults. They prefer the approachable lecturers who appear supportive and the teaching methods which are student-centred in the form of group discussion. Encouragement and praise are as important as being allowed to think independently and develop your own ideas. Or it may be that praise was uncommon in their school experience and therefore they have cited it as a difference. As people with more life experience than the younger group, having their own ideas and opinions may not be new for them.

The Highers' group had a similar profile: *"Being responsible for your own learning, better relationships with lecturers and being allowed to think and develop your own ideas"* were of primary importance. Some of these may be aspects of a maturing process. Like the Non-Highers, they were treated with respect and recognized as an individual. The personal aspect of the relationship with lecturers, where lecturers were seen to take an interest in their more individualistic responses and circumstances seemed to be a key element. There was no mention of *subject interest, choice of curriculum* or *increased confidence.* The fact that none of those with Highers chose to include subject interest probably did not indicate a lack of interest. These younger students were more used to choosing and had demonstrated an interest in their choice of Highers so this aspect of education may have been taken for granted by them. None used the terms "*relaxed, informal, laid-back"*. It is possible that those with Highers did not see college as "*relaxed"*; this term would be in conflict with the Highers' most highly cited difference between school and college of "*being in charge of your own learning*", the very opposite of "*relaxing*", particularly for the younger students who may have been less independent.

Another comparison: HN Supporting Learning Needs and BSc Computing

As discussed in the methodology section, the subject specialism (teaching and learning) of the initial 95 respondents from the HNSLN course may have resulted in the data being biased. It may be that they rated the three components of **teaching methods, practical placement** and **support from staff** highly because their course was about teaching and learning. To address this possible bias, and to explore the possibility of similarities with other courses, a computing course, which had a different emphasis on resources than the HNSLN course and where the student profile was different (mainly male), was surveyed. 27 students on the BSc. Computing course answered the questionnaire at the end of their academic year. The results from this group were then compared with the results from all 95 respondents of the HNSLN group (see Appendix B for data). Although there was a difference in the BSc. Computing course from the HNSLN course, in that it was at a higher academic level and the reliance on resources was critical, these computing students rated **teaching methods** and **resources** equally (48%) and **support from staff** was chosen by 44% of the students. So they agreed with the HNSLN group that **support from staff** and **teaching methods** were two out of the three most important factors for success. (One of the triad of important factors for the HNSLN group, **practical placement**, was not applicable for the computing course.)

It is interesting that although computing cannot carry on without computers, it would seem that they are considered to be an adjunct to more necessary support and learning factors. It may be that machines are only as useful as the 'mechanics' who teach you how to learn from them. Another similarity with the HNSLN survey findings is the response to **assessments**. Although it was given a higher grading by the computing students than the SLN students (seventh instead of tenth) no-one made it their first choice. On the computing degree assessments are usually used as final marks and not in a diagnostic way. It may be that the students felt that the assessments were just a vehicle to grade performance rather than a means of successful learning. **Support from peers** (rated fifth by all the HNSLN students) may have been rated low (19%) by the computing students because computing is mainly an individual activity with little discussion and opportunity for group work. The personal qualities of **increase in self confidence** and **personal organisation**, given by 30% and 22% of the computing students, were rated slightly higher than by those on the HNSLN course.

In summary, it would be fair to say that, apart from the resources, the BSc. Computing students rated the 10 factors in a similar way to the HNSLN students. **Teaching methods** and **support from staff** were given high priority; **practical placement** (for the HNSLN students) and **resources** (for the computing students) were seen to be the elements that made up the triad. Both groups saw the practical component (or at least what facilitated the practical part) of the course as having a complementary function: the computers and software may have served the same function for the BSc students as the work placement did for the HNSLN students. These two factors were sandwiched between the teaching and the staff possibly denoting that practice is only as good as the teaching expertise that surrounds it.

The BSc Computing group gave similar answers to the 95 HNSLN students for question two in the questionnaire. Of the 27 respondents, nine (33%) said the difference between school and college was that college was *"relaxed, informal and laid back"*. 19% of the respondents said that there was a *"better relationship with the lecturers"*. 10 of the 19 factors given by the group of 95 HNSLN students were mentioned by the computing students. One computing student mentioned the student loan.

Summary of results of the questionnaire

The similarities between the two groups of HNSLN students were much greater than had been hypothesized. The three most important elements to both groups in the HNSLN were **support from staff, teaching methods,** and **practical placement.** The least important was **assessments**. The two groups agreed on the importance of **peer support, lecture content and increase in self-confidence**. *"Responsibility for your own learning"* was seen as the biggest difference between school and college for the Highers group and *"interest in the subject"* was seen as the most significant difference for the Non-Highers group. Both groups cited a *"better relationship with lecturers"*. *"Being treated as an adult, recognised as an individual and giving opinions and developing own ideas"* were seen by the students as the key difference between school and college. The BSc Computing students confirmed these priorities for success with **resources** substituting **practical placement**. They gave *"approachable lecturers"* as the main difference between school and college. The similarities between those with Highers and those without and between two courses, HNSLN and BSc Computing, argued for a more representative case than was first thought. The question on whether the qualified versus

the non-qualified needed different learning approaches appeared to be no. It made the end task of creating a model more simple as only one difference ("*being responsible for your own learning"*) needed to be explored to make the model useful for a mixed (in terms of qualifications and age) class.

The data from the questionnaire required a cautious interpretation. There was a danger of reading too much into a small sample and as mentioned in the methodology chapter, perhaps there were too many expectations about the nature of quantitative data. The interpretation of the answers to the questionnaire involved speculation. Knowing the respondents as students gave me some insight but it was clear that the quantitative part of the study provided evidence on the similarity of the two groups but further exploration was required to discover the reasons for the students' choices. The numerical data was a basis for identifying issues that required a more qualitative examination in the interviews. The choice of **support from staff** and **teaching methods** was gratifying in terms of the researcher's interests but these two general terms have endless meanings and the efficacy of the teaching model was dependent on the specifics of this support and methods.

CHAPTER 5

DATA ANALYSIS 2: THE INTERVIEWS

The interview schedule was drawn up using the data from the questionnaires. **Staff support** and **teaching methods** were the two key areas to explore. The other areas of **peer support, lecture content** and **increase in confidence** were taken into consideration when designing the questions. There was no direct question on the third factor rated most important in the questionnaire (**practical placement)** beyond a general question asking for further explanation of their choices. As a college of further education, the importance of vocational experience was paramount and because work placement was in some ways beyond the dictates of the college (except for ensuring that monitoring and quality assurance were maintained) it was decided to concentrate on those areas of experience which could be directly affected in the classroom.

There were two sets of interviews: those with 35 students (Non-Highers) contained 10 questions and those with 25 students with Highers which contained three questions. Since the success of those students with no Highers was the focal point of the study, this more detailed interview will be discussed first.

In the introduction to the interviews, there was a statement about the researcher's interest: "I am interested in the relationship between the learning experience at college, your definition of yourself in this process, and how these two factors relate to your success on your HN course." This statement informed the students that the key issues were themselves as learners and how their experience at college helped them to succeed.

The interview schedule was designed so that there was reference to the questionnaire requiring more detail; two of the pivotal questions on learner identity and shared learning were inserted in the middle of the interview as it was considered to be an optimal place for gaining the interviewee's ease and alertness. They needed to be comfortable with the process but also alert enough to make thoughtful replies.

To distinguish between the interview questions and the interviewees' answers, the question will be in bold italics at the beginning of the section and all quotes from participants will use quotation marks and italics.

Interview Questions: Non-Highers

I am interested in the relationship between the learning experience at college, your definition of yourself in this process and how those factors relate to your success on your HN course.

In the survey you listed as the 3 most important factors in succeeding at college as:

1)   Can you tell me a bit more about that?

2)   You also stated that the learning experience was different from school in that _____

Can you say a bit more about how that aspect may have helped you to succeed?

3) At what age and why did you decide to come back to college?

4) What made you think you could succeed?

5) What does being a student mean to your definition of yourself?

6) Did you see learning as a "communal activity" (Bruner)

7) If so, how was it communal and what did you share with the group?

8) If the quality of teaching had an effect on your learning experience, can you explain how?

9) How did the incremental nature of the course (NC, then HNC & HND and then 3rd year of university) affect your attitude to your studies?

10) Anything to add, questions to ask?

Permission to use quotes   yes/no
Permission to attribute quotes to real name   yes/no

Non-Highers' interviews

35 out of the 54 students who answered the questionnaire who had no Highers when they entered college, were interviewed. (Information on the selection process can be found in the methodology chapter.)

Question 1: In the survey you listed as the 3 most important factors in succeeding at college as: 1,2,3.   Can you tell me a bit more about that?

The first two questions were designed to elicit more in-depth information from the survey. It gave the respondents the chance to elaborate on what they meant by those general terms. Most of the Non-Highers interviewees had chosen **support from staff** (17 out of 35) and **teaching methods** as one or both of their factors for success. The most common comment regarding **support from staff** was "*I wouldn't have done it without the support from staff*". This could have been read as an indication of a high level of dependency; however, this dependency was not borne out by accompanying statements. The support was related to acquired confidence in most cases and the approachability of staff was seen as a key factor in enhancing understanding. In two cases, the staff support was specified: for one it was help given with "writing" and for another it was the feedback. The majority of the students indicated it was more amorphous than a specific act of support. Some students mentioned that it was important that there was someone you could go to if there were problems; the lecturers were never "*too busy*" and the students "*always got an answer*" (Margaret).

These comments are interesting in the light of reality. Sometimes lecturers are "too busy" to answer questions and in the case of this course, sometimes there is no answer (direct, black and white) to give. So, although the reality may have been different for the lecturer, it was perceived by some students that we were always there with an answer. Perhaps it was a comment on the reliability of staff and the students' expectation of this; being able to get an answer gave them a sense of reassurance not that, in academic terms, there was always an answer to the more difficult intellectual issues on the course. "I don't know" can be just as reassuring as an answer as long as the speaker has authority and is there to give the answer when it is needed. Roslyn W. expressed staff support as, "*somebody here, there was loads of encouragement. You need to know your opinions matter, you are valued.*" This conflation of *you* and *your opinions* indicates

that students' identities and sense of being were caught up in their ideas and opinions and this is an important aspect of Entwistle's (1996) theories on learning having an effect on the whole person. This theme resurfaced throughout the interviews. On a final note, one student said the staff support had a continuing effect on her success in her career. When asked whether her relationship with her tutor had an effect on her college success, "*Still now*" (Elaine I.) was her answer. This continuation was seen in other ex-students.

Teaching methods was chosen by 17 out of the 35 Non-Highers interviewees (12 gave it as their first choice). The discussion centred on how staff presented their lessons and what types of teaching methods the students responded to. The comments on teaching methods were interesting because they were unexpected by the researcher. I thought they would list some learning approaches, reeled off from one of the units on their course. Error free learning and discussion were the only two recognisable methods given. Error free learning was used in the context of discussion and speaking out and that your opinion can't be "*wrong*" as such (John). What came across was not so much a teaching method as an ethos of the classroom. Most students mentioned discussion, giving opinions and exchanging ideas, either with the lecturer or other students – an interactive approach. "*Hearing others' opinions affects your opinion*" (Pauline). It could be assumed that setting up discussions and facilitating a frank exchange of views was seen as a method although this was not directly stated by the interviewees. It was seen as positive that the teaching was "*not all teacher led*" and that learning by "*using people in the class*" (Roslyn) was enabled by the classroom dynamics. There was discussion, "*rather than just information*": this distinction between information and discussion could be said to imply that information by itself is not learning. Learning occurs when information is discussed. Clarity of explanation and the encouragement of independent thought, "*there was a need to think for yourself*" (Roslyn W.), were also considered methods that worked. The "*need to think for oneself*" was explained: "*by methods, I meant the way the course was approached; we were encouraged to think our own ideas – challenged.*"

It is interesting that many of these comments were similar to the ones made on the questionnaire in the difference between school and college. The researcher assumed by teaching methods was meant the way in which the lecturer conveyed the information.

What came back was almost the attitude of the lecturer towards the student in encouraging personal opinion (also cited in the questionnaire) and independent thought. They were supported in giving expression to these thoughts in class, whereby others could respond.

The researcher saw this as a definition of the learning process: the respondents saw this as a teaching method. Is the difference purely semantic? I think not. What many teachers struggle for is a set of principles. They can then work on the teaching skills that match. I was expecting a critique of those teaching skills to provide a model of "tips for teachers". The comment closest to this idea was, teaching is more *visually interesting now*" (Dorothy) – a reference to the use of videos, teaching aids, and practical sessions using equipment. This comment came from a student who had left school in the 1960s.

These answers had the same amorphous quality as those given when asked to elaborate on **support from staff.** The students' interpretation was far more subtle than "tips for teachers". (This is shorthand for that mechanistic, competence-driven, performative approach to teaching which can be prevalent in FE.) They were leading me towards a set of principles underneath the "tips". What my students told me was that the underlying current, not the surface explanation, but the deeper one, was the essential aspect. What was emerging here was an explanation of how the right conditions for learning were created. Once the student is receptive to the more implicit methods which have an effect on the overall classroom ethos, as long as there is some variety to keep it interesting, cartwheels and computer wizardry could have been used to deliver the material. (As a "deliverer" of staff development teaching approaches, this was both a surprise and also created a challenge. Practical skills are easier to master than principles and guidelines on creating classroom cultures.)

Only one person mentioned handouts in a positive way. The other two students who made a specific reference to handouts said they were too prescriptive. Much effort is put into the handouts in FE. For some courses they are the main means of communicating information and course content. Perhaps they are so effective that the rest of the students took them for granted. On the other hand, it may be that they are less important to the learning process than lecturers assume. It is possible there is a link between handouts and assessments. Much effort is put into both with little probable effect on the learning.

They are both controlled by the teacher and both are about information giving, either as delivered by the lecturer to the student, or returned by the student in the form of an assessment. Taking and giving back information, while it does not rule out learning, may be seen by the students as just a reciprocal process in accountability. They leave it to the lecturer which is a sign of trust, but, ultimately it may not have much to do with a lasting effect of the learning experience.

Comments on how **practical placement** (rated third by the Non-Highers in importance for success) related to the overall learning experience, provided an insight into how the students saw the elements making up a "package" for success. The most consistent and emphatic comments came from the relationship between practical work and confidence. The practical placement part of the course enabled them to put ideas into action ("*if you didn't have the placement you wouldn't see it in action*" Emma), a sense of the real world (learning isn't "*all about paper*"– Helen) and they "*gained confidence learning on the job*" (Elaine McK.). This confidence that came from doing a job and "real life" experience (as opposed to that of the classroom) is corroborated elsewhere (McGivney 1999). For some it was an acknowledged "*way of learning*", for some it added interest and for others, the placement was critical ("*it can make or break the course*" – Roslyn McI.).

The interesting and surprising (to the researcher) part in these answers is that the students spoke with animation and at length about the practical part of the course which is usually considered by each student group to be the most interesting and yet its placing on the rating scale is never higher than third place (only 6 out of 39 students gave it as first choice). It could be that, although this part of the course provides the central interest, it is only useful in combination with college input (**support from staff** and **teaching methods**).

Life experience and work may have been seen as related; comments about the two were often discussed in terms of the other; they appeared to be interchangeable terms. "*Work and life experience gave you what school and qualifications did not*"(Billy).

The interviewees cited the importance of "*bringing life experience to the course*" and several of the working students mentioned the benefit from maturity and life experience

("*If I'd come straight from school I wouldn't have done so well*" – Lesley). Another student commented on the benefits of being in a group, the buddy system and how that builds up relationships. This was mentioned in relation to teaching and learning and has some relevance to the question on learning as a communal activity. Margaret, an adult returner, said, "*I felt very much a part of the group – the buddy system worked – it helped build relationships...the course stopped me from becoming an old fuddy-duddy.*" It is interesting that the experience of being a student had an effect on her identity. Some mentioned the freedom to express individual opinions ("*If you're coming from a different angle, it doesn't mean you're wrong.*"– Aileen) and another mentioned the support from peers in explaining things in plain English (some staff "*used terms instead of explanations*" – Billy). Billy asked the other students for clarification. This comment shows the difference between understanding about knowledge at a superficial level (terms) and knowledge at a deeper level; Billy had the ability to perceive and understand the difference between a term and an explanation and how teachers can often use terms without explanation which can create a barrier (conscious or otherwise) between themselves and the students.

Only one student used the word knowledge: "*Knowledge gives you confidence*" (Liz). As discussed in the methodology chapter, there is the problem of interpreting things that aren't said. Interpreting why the others did not use the word is difficult. It is possible that knowledge is considered to be an all-encompassing word or there is a self-effacing attitude among students about describing themselves as knowledgeable that remains from their previous poor academic record. It is an interesting omission particularly coming from students on a course with education as a subject base and in an interview about teaching and learning.

12 out of the 35 chose **personal organisation** as one of their priorities. Of the 12, all but two students had children. It may seem an obvious conclusion, but it would appear that personal organisation is a necessity if embarking on a college course if you are a parent (perhaps this would depend on whether you are a mother or father).

No one gave the impression that their college career had been other than a positive, confidence-boosting learning experience. This was surprising, in that the exact opposite can be observed at the beginning of each course. Students are anxious, lacking in

confidence and apologetic about their work and the way they articulate ideas. At the beginning, most students preface their remarks and the assignments with, "I'm not sure if this is right but…".The positive reflective comments in the interviews could be seen as a gain in self-confidence.

The most commonly used words in answer to this first question were: *"confidence, encouragement, support and life experience."*

Question 2: You also stated that the learning experience was different from school in that _____. Can you say a bit more about how that aspect may have helped you to succeed?

This question asked for an elaboration on the second question of the questionnaire. However, in the interviews, I asked the students to link the difference between college and school with success. This was to ensure that they interpreted the word "difference" in a more evaluative way.

The most common response to this question from the Non-Highers was that they were more motivated in college because they were more interested in the subject(s). Many had been branded as "failures" at school (*"I took on their definition of my intelligence"* Lyn). This resulted in a poor relationship with teachers; eleven of the respondents said that at college they were *"treated with more respect and opinions were valued"*. At college you are *"asked what you think"*. Phrases such as *"less formal, more relaxed, comfortable about asking"* were used by nine students: other research (McGivney 1996; Ainley and Bailey 1999; Gallagher 2000) also highlights this difference. One of the four school leavers who were interviewed said that *"allowing discussion means better learning"* (Catherine). The use of "allowing" indicates a sense of the breaking of rules and also that discussion did not form part of her school experience whereas in college, on this course, it was a dominant and widely used method of learning and teaching. There is an interesting thread that runs through the responses: the students link class interaction and discussion, with effective learning and intelligence. *"I enjoyed the educational experience. Had school been like that I may have been brighter"* (Roddy).

Relationships with teachers/lecturers were central to the learning process. Some students had no experience of good relationships with teachers, not even the common "one inspiring teacher". Some attributed their "school failure" to poor personal relationships with teachers; this experience remained with them in adulthood. One of the school leavers (and one of the most imaginative and critical thinkers in the class) said there was a direct relationship between the teacher and learning. "*For the kind of learner that I am I saw the person. In school the teacher was the subject*" (Roslyn C.). If the "teacher (is) the subject" and the only way some learners learn is through a relationship with the teacher, then it may be that the teaching model requires an understanding of the importance of classroom relationships and how this is demonstrated within the teaching approach.

Question 3: At what age and why did you decide to come back to college?

This question was to ascertain the number of interviewees who were "adult learners" as specified by age (20+) to see if there was a relationship between this age group, lack of formal qualifications and reasons for returning to college. 31 of the 35 interviewees with no Highers were over 20. Four were under 20, having left school at 16 to come to college with no Highers. This data meant that the interviewees could be seen as mainly adult returners but it is perhaps an irrelevant distinction in that the other four were all as different and as alike. So, although this group could be referred to, broadly, as adult returners, it was only useful as another description: by this I mean that it was only useful as a descriptive term rather than a determining factor. Some attitudes could be explained by age and when (i.e. in what educational era) they attended school, some could be explained by qualifications (or lack of) and for some, it was a combination of these factors. There was no clear correlation between age, qualifications and reasons for returning.

The majority of this group of Non-Highers had had a poor experience at school and came to college to enhance their job prospects. 13 of the respondents "*needed a career rather than a job*" (Linda) and some of them related better job prospects to enjoyment of this area of work. Eight interviewees indicated some form of pleasure associated either with the course or the work that would ensue from the course. There was also mention of a "*better life*" with a change in job. One student said she came to college "*to stop her*

getting pregnant" (it didn't work) but it was interesting how the domestic life of some of the women dictated their choices. For six people the juncture in their life was important. Some needed to get out of the house: "*I can't sit here watching Richard & Judy and waiting on a pension*" (Therese) and there was a familiar pattern of seeking a job once their children were at school or less dependent. Some had decided to do something for themselves. "*I wanted to do it for myself, not for my children*" (Ann, mother). Two of the adult returners who did not have children said, "*I was looking for answers about myself – to find out about myself – wanted to prove something to myself*" (Aileen). "*I did it for my own reasons ... there was an element of independence and autonomy*" (Davina).

Although only the first student was a mother, it is interesting how all three women see this learning experience as an expression of self. Expressing independence and a sense of self-knowledge through learning may be a stage of cognitive development in the thinking process. This will be addressed in the Chapter 8 on pedagogy using Belenky's (1986) study. Perhaps Davina and Aileen could be so honest in their motivation for self because they did not feel the social pressures of the mother role. Mothers may have considered it selfish to express this desire for seeking self-satisfaction. This learning and finding out about oneself through the course was also mentioned by some of the interviewees with Highers.

Three of the school leavers left school knowing what area they wanted to work in and specifically chose the course for that reason. The other school leaver said her decision was based on "*chance*". She had had a positive work experience at a special school and she met a young girl with learning difficulties on a beach –"*so it was (name of school) and a girl on a beach*" (Roslyn C).

It is important to see this "rogue data" in the light of the more expected answers. We know that reasons for making decisions that change our lives are often dependent on individual, one-off, serendipitous happenstance (Bloomer & Hodkinson 2000). These are, of course, impossible to categorise: it may be that there are some psychological profiles that indicate a personality type that is more likely to act in this way but it would not further this study to pursue that line of inquiry. What is perhaps important for the methodology of this study is that these one-off cases are taken into consideration. The

learning model needs to accommodate one-off people as well as a group of students who have similar profiles.

To sum up, reasons for coming to college were mainly, purposeful. A minority wanted to do a specific course for a specific job. For the most part, however, students expressed a more vague, less directionally specific, desire for change and to do a job or pursue a course which they enjoyed, which they thought they might be good at, and which some of them linked to better life opportunities.

Question 4: What made you think you could succeed?

This question examines the idea of success and the presumed self-confidence that that concept expresses. Four categories emerged. Confidence to do the course came from work experience, partner and/or family, work colleagues, and self-knowledge. 10 respondents gained the confidence to succeed from comparing themselves to others in the workplace. *"If they (teachers) can do it, so can I"* (Davina). Two students said they gained their confidence from being mothers. Of the eight interviewees who gained their confidence from others, two were encouraged by colleagues.

There may be a difference between self-confidence gained through work experience and seeing your ability for yourself, and confidence gained through the comments of others. *"They (the family) could see something I couldn't see in myself"* (Aileen).The difference between seeing something for yourself and seeing it because others have told you, appears to me to be a degree of depth and conviction and involves a different set of factors. The difference seems important in learning: self-knowledge can be reached through a process of reflection and critical thinking. This pattern can be usefully applied in classroom and work situations. If your confidence is based on what others have said and these evaluations may not be in accord with your own thinking about your ability, there may be a longer journey to make in terms of confidence building.

Six students knew that they had the ability to succeed in school, had they chosen to do so. Three adult returners expressed this self-belief. *"All through school, I knew it was there but I didn't encourage it"* (Patricia). *"I had the ability, not the motivation"* (Linda). *"I always knew I could have succeeded. I knew I had cheated myself, and others"*

(Therese)." This knowledge, in some cases, had been there at school and even though they had a poor experience of school, they knew their potential. It may be that these students (all adult returners) had done more reflection and critical thinking than the younger students and were ready to receive the type of education which depended on observation, insight and critical thinking. The motivation to return to education came from interest in the subject and the desire to change their life circumstances and take up a career of choice. One student said she also gained from living in Australia for 12 years where she was an "*outsider*" (Roslyn Mcl.). Here again, "outsiders" have a way of "looking-in" and recognising dualities of culture which requires the type of thinking that we were aspiring to on the college course. This group of so-called "school failures" had a high degree of self-knowledge and perception of intelligence. They appeared to have done some thinking on the nature of intelligence and how we assess it. Only one student in this group said she had gained the confidence "*from school exams*" (Catherine). The relationship between educational attainment and self-esteem is complex and there is contradictory evidence (Emler 2001).

Once again, the most interesting group could be classified as the "rogue group". Unlike the majority of the students who knew they had the ability to succeed, this group entered college, without giving conscious consideration to success or more negatively, thinking there was a possibility of failure. "*It wasn't part of the thought process*" (John M). Another response was: "*If I was going to succeed at anything, it would be at something I enjoyed*" (Elaine McN.). The interviewer intervened here to question whether the word "*if*" indicated a doubt about her success by asking, "you were willing to gamble at failing?" The reply was, "*I had to.*" Some students thought they might fail, one person indicated this by recounting how "*terrified*" she had been and one "*hadn't thought that far – of succeeding and getting a job*" (Dorothy). The "rogue" students who came to college without considering the outcome in terms of being successful are difficult to interpret. All but one had taken on a definition from school of their unsuitability to education for various reasons. Some chose to ignore the teacher's definition or valued contrary opinions from work and life experience more. For some, the source of their dissatisfaction with school stemmed from the attitude that work had more value than school.

Some debate is required on why the confidence to succeed is important. One of the assumptions about a poor experience at school is that it leaves a residual sense of failure which either prevents re-entry into any form of formal education in the worst cases, or it means that those who do find the courage to return have a tremendous barrier to surmount. What this research proposes is that school does have an influence but that positive experiences at work or support from colleagues and/or family can overcome some of the damaging effects of school.

"Jack-the-lad" culture, compounded by pressures for income from home and perhaps parental expression of their own difficulties with formal education all contributed to some of the interviewees' attitudes to school performance. This fits into Gorard & Rees' (2002) findings that early experiences of schooling often determine learner identity to a greater extent than other factors. This self-assessment did not prevent them from thinking they could succeed at college or, for those who did not think in terms of success, did not prevent them from giving it a go. We can categorise the Non-Highers into three groups: those who questioned their school outcomes and its relationship to their ability; those who took on board the definition of academic failure but came anyway; and those who "leapt" into the experience with little apparent attention to the outcome. This "starting point" has implications for their learner identity and will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

Question 5: What does being a student mean to your definition of yourself?

The majority (24 out of 35) said that being a student did say something about their self-definition. Eight students said that it "*raised my opinion of myself*" (Aileen); six said it was about "*bettering yourself*" (Sam) and five said it was about the continuation of learning. One student summed these up when she said, "*It means I am striving for higher things, (one) who is consuming knowledge in order to increase my intellect*" (Lynn McD.).

Some rejected the term as applicable to them; they were too old, they were concerned with their career and didn't see themselves as students but as people being trained. Six interviewees said that they saw students as "hardworking" and not different from working at a job. Nine of the interviewees said they didn't see themselves as students;

some defined the term in a social sense rather than an educational one. The beer-swilling, time-wasting youthful image of a student was mentioned in several interviews as not being applicable to them. Only one student (a school leaver, aged 18) said she had found the pressures to meet this image "*stressful*" (Roslyn C.). For some studying meant no money: four students gave the monosyllabic "*poor*" response to this question.

There also appeared to be a residual feeling from school failure that even after they had gained qualifications, they found it difficult to take on this label of student. It was interesting that the students who felt they didn't match the social image of a student, did not refute that learning affected their identity in other ways. It made them feel important and gave them confidence, particularly in working with professionals. One interviewee who was employed as a classroom assistant in a support unit, said she was now able to go to the headteacher in her school and make suggestions for improving conditions for the pupils with additional learning needs.

This question was designed to examine the nature of student identity and how that related to confidence, other personal qualities and the experience of learning. However, it did not prove to be as useful for data on the chapter on learner identity as had been anticipated. Most of the interviewees saw this term as a social definition; a student was young, lazy and spent a lot of time in the pub. This image seemed to be one the adult returners (particularly those who were being financed from work as day-release students) brought with them to college and it remained. They were something else: hard-working, serious and more mature. Perhaps if the word "learner", instead of student, had been used the answers may have matched more closely with the research aim. In the final analysis the data for the section on learner identity was gathered from the other questions in the interview (see Chapter 7). The issue of learner identity was demonstrated in more narrative and holistic ways by the respondents. How they viewed their identity as "student" came across in more subliminal ways like the choice of vocabulary, tone of voice and stories they chose as examples, rather than any direct answer to this question.

Question 6: Did you see the learning as a "communal activity" (Bruner)?
Answers to this were, most emphatically, "yes". Group discussion was seen to be the place where communal activity happened (seven respondents). Discussion was seen as

both a learning activity in coming to grips with the knowledge and in aiding memory. If information which was "handed out" was not discussed, it was more difficult to remember, presumably because it had not been processed through the individual frameworks each student used. ("*It's got to be interactive to learn more effectively*" David). The exchange of ideas which were made more concrete and comprehensible through stories from experience, were part of the discussion process. Often these "storytelling sessions" were initiated by the lecturer who told a story from her experience and then the students followed suit. There was an interesting transition that occurred here in terms of the students' attitudes to these stories. At the beginning of the course they saw these stories as entertainment devices, breaking up the content to sustain interest, *"just"* a story. As their understanding of classroom dynamics developed, they began to see the cognitive and social purpose of these stories.

Some saw group activity as the classroom equivalent of teamwork. "*It only seemed to gel when we came together as a team*" (Roddy). "*Bouncing ideas*" (Helen) off each other, solidarity and sameness in a group ("*all in the same boat,*" Susan; "*all travelling down the same road*" Aileen) implied a shared experience. This sharing was a strong theme in many of the interviews and contributed to the reciprocal nature of the group dynamics. ("*I would have shared anything," Elaine I.).* Another student who found the course demanding said, "*If I miss it, someone else will get it*" (Joanne). This comment describes the sense of communality and, in this student's case, was not an excuse to sit back and let others work for her. This expectation, not only that someone else would understand, but that they would share that understanding with her, shows a group which is rich in social capital (Field 2003). Pantziarka (1987: 104) found in her study on Access students moving from further to higher education that:

> Students on Access courses develop a shared identity and they practise mutual aid on a scale which is uncommon among other students. Problems are shared and overcome together…they display a strong sense of comradeship and unity...

The students in this thesis were not Access students although they had similar academic profiles. The description of the Access students' behaviour matches the shared practice of the HNSLN groups who were interviewed.

It may be that this collaboration and reciprocity had an effect on their thinking and (this is only a tentative suggestion since it is a psychologist's field) it may have affected the way they constructed cognitive frameworks. Their thinking may have read something like this: "This is what I think based on previous knowledge, new knowledge and new experience. But, that other student, who works in a similar placement and has had a different life experience, thinks differently. Is she wrong? Am I right? Let me ask her. I can ask her now, in this discussion and if there is anything to develop or I'm not asking the appropriate questions, the lecturer will see me right." One student corroborated the importance of this immediacy in setting things right. *"As soon as you bounce something off, you get something back."* Another student mentioned the fact that discussion was "*allowed with every topic*" (Davina) and that this enabled her to check her thinking with others at the time. Clearing up any misunderstandings, making sure that the lecture content has been understood, rather than leaving the room with nagging doubts and questions, appeared to contribute to their self-confidence.

One respondent gave sites other than the classroom, where collaboration occurred: in the canteen, on the phone and at placement: if there were two or three students at the same establishment, they got together in their breaks. Some establishments said that having more than one student was a better experience for them due to this cooperative way of working. It was not just a simple case of confidence in numbers but an opportunity to exchange ideas and stories in context and, more importantly, as soon as they happened. It was also useful to have an opportunity to discuss with the staff in the establishment. This meant that when they came to college and recounted the story for the second time, it was with reflection and hindsight: a process which seemed to be useful for embedding. Two interviewees saw it in terms of swapping skills: the older student helped a student who had organisational difficulties (dyspraxia) with his essays and the younger student "*returned the favour*" (Graham) by sharing his knowledge of IT skills. Using others as resources comes close to what Bruner (1996) expresses about teachers using all the resources in the classroom, particularly the ones the students bring with them.

Being part of a group aided memory, enabled them to exchange ideas and taught them to reflect on experience. Confidence was engendered from this support. The researcher assumed that there may have been a difference in the answers from those students who had gone to school where group discussion was a common aspect of the teaching and

learning approach and the older generation who had sat in rows facing forward in the more didactic approach of whole class teaching. (In my own schooling I do not remember one incidence of group discussion and some of my students were my contemporaries.) The type of discussion (group on own, class with teacher guidance) was not specified, and only one student responded on this issue by saying it required teacher guidance to be useful. The point about discussion was that it was always "*allowed*"; everything was open to immediate checking and validation and engagement was considered to be critical to learning by the students.

The predominant and emphatic answer (many said "yes", in emphatic tones and immediately, without hesitation) was that learning was a communal activity and the way that was demonstrated in the classroom was through discussion and group work. However, it was more than a specified classroom activity. It was not just communal learning but a communality that some of their responses were alluding to. The students learned through others by sharing experiences but there was also a social dimension in the communality of a "*common purpose–we were all there to achieve the same goal, everybody shared information. We got together with stories in breaks*" (Nicci). The same student expresses this sharing of stories and learning together as a teaching/learning method: "*I picture us sitting around the tables and (the lecturer) telling us a story and using bits and pieces and someone else telling a story and (the lecturer) fit it together.*" For some students there was a lasting effect on their lifelong learning habits and attitudes. "*Being part of the group helped me to come back with an enthusiasm which I still have*" (Helen). I'm not sure where Helen had been, but being part of the group indicated for her the total learning experience through the exchange of ideas which had a lasting effect and renewed her enthusiasm for working with children in a residential school. Perhaps the affective nature of this group strength also supported their cognitive development which enabled them to take some skills from the classroom and put them into practice in their work. It gave them a renewed energy, both emotionally and intellectually.

Three students modified their answers to this question with balanced comments on how the group could be distracting and two students said they did not see learning as communal. These two found the group held them back ("*I had to work for the group*" Mary) or said they could work better on their own. They were experienced classroom

assistants who had come to college with definite ideas of career advancement. These two students did not appear different in their attitude to group discussion and there was no apparent difference in the way they related to the class group as observed by the teacher/researcher. Perhaps they did not interpret group discussion as a type of communal learning.

Some interviewees were ambivalent: "*To an extent, group work let you know whether you were on track by comparing with others. But sometimes you sat back because others would come up with the answers so (you were) not as challenged*" (Amanda, school leaver and dyslexic). Although this student interprets "sitting back" as hiding in a group it could be that listening to the group was her form of learning. Another student commented how she felt about the lack of reciprocity: "*You can get resentful if you are always giving*" (Joanne). This resentment was not evident in others' interviews. This does not mean it didn't exist; it may be that it was not acceptable to the groups' mores to express a negative comment about others. This comment was unique. It also contradicted her next answer which was, "*there's a give and take with information*".

Before the interviews, the researcher had seen this question on communal learning as pivotal. It contained a theoretical stance summed up in Bruner's (1986) ideas on communal learning, which implied a learning approach through group work. It also corroborated a classroom observation by the teacher that shared learning appeared to support understanding. Talking within discussion groups appeared to be a more effective way for my students to learn rather than reading or individual research or listening to lectures. It was a way of consolidating knowledge once new knowledge had been introduced: perhaps a re-enactment of a way of learning which is to talk out a problem and let the words do the thinking – a form of what might be termed "kinaesthetic linguistics" whereby the dynamics of thinking are aided by the physical action of speaking. Shared learning was also concerned with building up a classroom culture.

In examining the issue of communal activity, although I had assumed that most students would have answered yes to this question, I had not anticipated the depth of their affirmation. While it confirmed my own beliefs as a teacher, as a researcher I had to acknowledge that my beliefs and practice may have affected their answer. Was this the "required" answer? Possibly. However, if the required answer is given, it is usually

delivered in a hesitant manner with less personal conviction. (As a secondary school teacher, I came across many pupils who had learned to perfect the "this is what the teacher wants" game, so I think I would have recognised this.).

There should be some differentiation between group discussion, group activities and being part of a group. We know that learning is a social activity but the communal parts are about the nature of the activity, using each other as contributors, doing things as a team and using the collective to support and sustain you in learning. How did the contributor, the collective and the activity enmesh to provide better learning? Did the nature of discussion nurture behaviour which began to see learning as something that happened in an interactive collective where you had to contribute to gain something? Does discussion effect more than an exchange of ideas: does it create a thinking that enables group dynamics to create the conditions of learning for themselves? Are thinking and learning different when done in a group compared to individual thinking or is it just a question of quantity: more people, more ideas? These questions emanated from the interviews and will be dealt with in the next chapter on group learning and in the teaching model in Chapter 9.

Question 7: If so, how was it communal and what did you share with the group?

This first part of the question was often answered in the previous question. What they shared with the group was more than a social assessment: it indicated a sense of bonding beyond mere exchange of similar background stories. The key words were: *(life) experiences* (12), *different views, background, age* (8) *support* (7), *same and shared* (6). Differences in age, experience, views and background were seen to be conducive to learning ("*a good balance,*" Roslyn W.). What emerged was a sense of how they used the exchange of stories, experiences and ideas, whether different or similar, to reach a balanced group ethos. This was expressed in sharing, ("*someone could take my idea and use it…it helped others understand*" Emma*)*, reciprocity ("*give and take with information,*" Joanne) and trust. These are all bonding elements that are products of social capital (Field 2003): how the classroom experience contributes towards this will be discussed in Chapter 9.

Some appeared to gain a strength from everyone working towards the same goal and being "*all travelling down the same road*" (Aileen). For some this was expressed as a camaraderie –"*I would have shared anything*" (Elaine I.); for others it seemed that the egalitarian nature of either the process and the group made it easier to trust, to reciprocate and to build up learning networks.

One of the two interviewees who answered no to question 6, used question 7 to modify her reply: "*I learned from others not to work in isolation*" (Mary). Contradictions in responses may present a difficulty for interpretation but they represent the way people think. Some interviewees changed their minds in the interview; some started off with a negative response and then gave reasons as if their answer was "yes". As I worked my way through the interviews I learned not to probe for a definitive positive or negative response but to accept the contradictory answers and interpret them as ambivalence – an expression of the way we relate to many aspects of life.

Question 8: If the quality of teaching had an effect on your learning experience, can you explain how?

This question was not perfect in research terms since the interviewer had to explain that "quality" was used in a neutral sense and could mean good or poor teaching. Like the previous question on communal learning, this question was also generally answered by an emphatic "yes" and there was little hesitancy in the answer. The answers fitted into two broad categories: the attitude of the teacher/lecturer and the teaching method. There is usually a relationship between these two: what is perhaps interesting is the recognition and "pairing" of these two factors by the students.

All attitudinal aspects were related to confidence boosting. Support, "*faith*" and (the lecturer) "*push(ing) us on*"(Elaine I.) were all considered as contributing to increasing students' self esteem. Feedback on writing, workplace practice and oral presentations was also mentioned as having a direct relationship to self confidence. While the best practice in further education is seen as giving constructive criticism, feedback is not always received by the students as in their best interests. Ways for improving work, for instance, may have been interpreted as helpful by one student and as negatively critical by another.

Once again discussion, group work and interaction were consistently mentioned as approved methods. "*You have to be involved in discussion. It's a must*" (Billy). Variety in methods and visual aids were also important for maintaining interest. Enjoyment was linked to engagement which was linked to memory retention and comprehension. There is debate whether fun in the classroom has cognitive spin offs but this word (fun) was mentioned directly by one student. "*There's a lot of fun and that encourages interaction and saying what you don't understand*" (Roslyn McI.). Roslyn's comment expresses the atmosphere or the ethos of the classroom which was perhaps denoted in the questionnaire answers as "*relaxed and laid-back*". The connection between fun, interaction and feeling confident enough to express lack of understanding are deliberate attempts to make use of the socio-emotional dynamics of group learning which can then lead to more cognitive outcomes. Being able to ask questions and state confusion are essential for learning. Others made comments about the negative aspects of some classroom presentation styles ("*so boring it made you lose the will to live ... you lost touch with the subject*" Elaine I.). One student mentioned that if it was boring it was distracting, as if the presentation was the subject. Another student said that a boring style meant more work at home because they tended to drift off in the classroom and then had to go back to the beginning of their notes and pick up the ideas on their own when they got home. Working through the ideas and content on your own was more difficult because there was no-one there to discuss with or answer questions.

Content had to be presented with clarity and flexibility. Explanations which suited all abilities were required. There was some difference in opinion on handouts in that one saw them as useful and two others saw them as rigid and static. The point here is that others may have had thoughts on handouts but only three students mentioned them specifically. Interpreting why something isn't mentioned is obviously problematic; however, since the college spends much time, energy and money on producing this main vehicle for transmitting information, it would seem logical to discuss their absence. They were mentioned by three students only. It may be that this way of disseminating information was so widespread and axiomatic that the students did not mention them. It is also possible that where there was an over-reliance on handouts, this was coupled with a more mechanistic and functional way of presenting information. The *delivery* became more important than the learning. (There will be specific reference to this term in

Chapter 8.) It seemed to me as a lecturer, my use of handouts lessened year by year because they were ineffective as learning tools; it also seemed to me that the amount of classroom learning and activity was often in indirect proportion to the amount of handouts generated.

There was "*no room for the students' ideas*" (Diane) in the use of handouts. In this style of teaching there was a general impression that information was useful in acquiring knowledge but that it was the thinking that was important. It's about "*presenting a few facts but thinking about them*" (Margaret); "*making you think of reasons behind it*" (Pauline). One of the key findings was that students had an appreciation of the importance of the more lasting and deeper forms of cognitive engagement. There was little time for surface approaches, seen merely as regurgitation of information, and while there may have been some strategic thinking, focused on the absorption of the minimal amount of material required to pass the course, it was recognised as such, necessary to pass the "certification" elements of the course. In other words, the students seemed to make a clear distinction between what were the necessary requirements to pass and the "*more*" (Ruth D.) that represented what they had to do to enhance their learning and do more than pass. What emanated from the students was a clarity about learning being about engaging in a thinking process which had some contribution to a transformation of self.

The most interesting comments in question 8 centred around thinking. The students used metaphors more in this question than the others. As discussed in the methodology section, it was decided to examine these metaphors as expressions of conceptual thinking. Rather than see them at the level of the vernacular, as idiom or just a more familiar way of speaking, a case could be made that metaphors indicate a relationship between language, the speaker and the idea: the choice of metaphor indicated a cognitive process. The journey metaphor to represent learning was common: "*The journey to the decision was important*" (Davina); journeys have somewhere to go; they indicate both movement and progress. Comments on teaching style often conveyed a sense of movement:"*… teaching has to be movement and louder than sitting in a chair. Need to go into avenues to open up thinking*" (Patricia). "*Avenues*" with its implication of wide, open roads leading somewhere gives a sense of space with some boundaries. Some metaphors had to do with proximity (both physical and mental) of the teacher and the

students. Roslyn considered "*Those who lecture you from here* (hands out in front)" to be poor teachers because they did not tap into the students' individual ways of learning, thinking and their interests. The physical proximity (or lack of it) serves as an analogy to connectedness. This is the same student who commented that the teacher *was* the subject. These lecturers were not only physically distant (possibly sitting down behind a desk at the front of the class) but also intellectually removed. They were *delivering* information, not teaching people.

Seeing learning as opening up, almost an "awakening" was another metaphor that was used: "*Opened my eyes to new ideas to be less rigid*" (Pauline). The opening of eyes occurred in a direct way for students in that they began reading, not just to read, but were engaged in the sustained pleasurable immersion in regular reading: "*This year I've read a dozen books whereas before I never read a book,*" (Joanne).One ex-student was reading psychology books – books she would have found difficult previously. She attributed her interest and understanding to the course. Metaphors will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 on discourse.

The lasting effect of the college experience was a surprise to the researcher. The student (Helen) who talked about her renewed enthusiasm for her job was interviewed eight years after her course. Another student commented on the lasting effect the teaching had on her five years after she had left college and gained a degree at university. For this researcher, the expression "lifelong learning" was taking on a realistic meaning which existed outside the world of educational rhetoric.

Making connections

The question on the quality of teaching produced data which took on the appearance of lasting connections: connections between college and work, ideas with experience, students connecting with lecturers and connecting with reality (as opposed to lecturers who were too "*textbook*" Elizabeth). Although Billy did not use the word connect, I think it is connections of ideas that he is alluding to when he discusses the lecturer's part in discussion*;"(The lecturer) always took something from it whether right or wrong: always drawing something from it. The answer was always relevant to the question, whether wrong or right."* The sense of the lecturer "*drawing*" a meaning from students' comments, what one student called "*reading between the lines*" (Ann), making it

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relevant, shows an understanding and an appreciation of the interactive qualities of discussion. Talking through an idea with someone else was a very common way for these students to reach an understanding.

The interviewees also made a subtle distinction between relevance and "correctness". The "*answer*" (see Billy's comment above) may have been incorrect in terms of information, but in metacognitive terms, it was always relevant. Social dynamics, acknowledgement of independent thought (whether "wrong or right") contributed to group cohesion and individual self-confidence. Using different criteria, all contributions were always "correct".

For some students, there was a recognition that the connections emanated from the structure of the lesson/lecture. Ann saw the format as "*(the lecturer) would go off in another area and then bring it back; they read between the lines. It was a question of balance and timing.*" Timing was, in this case, a comment on picking up when to move on, when to spend time on a point and when to intervene in discussion.

Many of the students mentioned how things made sense and "clicked into place". They could connect ideas in class with what had happened in the placement or how ideas from one college unit shed light on another unit.

> The feeling of understanding also included a recognition of coherence and connectedness. The idea of things "clicking into place" or "locking into a pattern" was frequently mentioned, and this conveyed an implication of completeness. (Entwistle 1996: 103)

Time was seen as an indicator of flexibility. Aileen commented that the lesson time was not in a "*wee box*" but had a "*fluidity and flexibility*" to it. Perhaps this was a way of saying that learning is not a nine to five activity and that the lecturer controlled a sense of how to manage the lesson time so that learning was optimal. There is no point in keeping students in class who are glazed over with information overload or lapsing into a sugar low because their learning curve will have plummeted. For Aileen, this flexibility indicated more than a willingness to let students operate outside the designated times; it represented a more holistic understanding of how students learned.

For Tracey, the structure of the lesson was important; in discussing methods she stressed the importance of a "*good*" structure by which she meant a clear transmission of lecture content and the lecturer "*knowing what they want to teach*". This sounds somewhat axiomatic but what Tracey is expressing here is an understanding that the information content and the expectations of what they are learning may be different. It also implies a certainty of approach in that the lecturer appeared to be in charge of the learning: even if some of the information was presented as uncertain, there was an overall sense of direction and control. Learning "*more*" (Ruth D.) than the information was the norm. This appreciation of learning more than is required seems antithetical to the instrumental student who learns merely what is required.

The overall impression from this question was that the larger picture of intellectual endeavour, the thinking, was the journey worth making. The connections that were made were ones which linked ideas and experience and this was aided by a connection between the student and the lecturer. Bakhtin's idea of the dialogic nature of language and self seems to fit in here. In a sense, words belong to people; they "populate" them with their own intention, meaning and accent. They provide them with an idiosyncratic context. When students "appropriate(s) the word" (Bakhtin in Wertsch 1991: 96) and use it to express an idea they do so in a way which changes them as thinkers and allows them to connect both cognitively and socially, through a linguistic medium. We use talk and discourse to shape ourselves as well as negotiate others' meanings. This is evident in some of the interviewees' answers: Pauline talks about seeing "*things from other perspectives. It changes you. I was quite judgemental. I look at it differently now. There's a reason for everything.*" They not only become more open to others' opinions and ideas but use them to amend their own. This is not seen as just a cerebral activity with a change in cognition, it is seen as a change in the person. They *are* their ideas. "*Opinions don't come from text books they come from the class – and yourself,*" (Esther). This was expressed by most of the interviewees and given a degree of importance. There was almost universal consensus that ownership of learning was linked to respect for their own ideas, both from the peer group and their tutor. There was a dialectical relationship between the two.

> This impact is, I suggest, essentially a matter of language and relationship: a dialogue between the language of the subject being taught, and the language of each pupil's self as a learner in relation to someone other, and also to a potential other in that self. (McGonigal 2004: 3)

This potential other is, I think, what drives us as teachers. We seek to bring out that "potential other". It has particular reference to some of the metaphors used by the students in these interviews. According to Bakhtin (Eagleton 1983: 117), all language is "caught up in definite social relationships" which are constantly reshaping meaning. When students discuss ideas in class they speak to, and with, each other and the opinions they form are wrapped in that context. The lecturer is both involved in these social relationships and also sits outside it in a dual role. The lecturer is in the enviable position of being able to see this change in students' language and their relationship to learning and anticipate the emergence of a new way of looking at themselves. These ideas take on more contextual relevance in Chapter 6, Discourse and Learning Communities. As McGonigal (2004: 15) says:

> we participate as human beings with others, talking in groups and productive social contexts, and negotiating not only towards understanding or clarification of meaning, but also towards a conceptual framing of our own selves.

It is knowing the kind of learner you want to be and the one you were (most of the interviewees had a well-developed sense of metacognition) and then exploring the dimensions of that change. This self-directed learning approach came from an examination of learning styles which was actively promoted within the classroom. This decision and understanding of what kinds of learners they wanted to be came from data throughout the interviews of the Non-Highers but it was the interviews with the Highers where the data appeared most useful. This will be explored further in the section on the interviews with the Highers group.

Question 9: How did the incremental nature of the course (NC, then HNC & D and then 3rd year of university) affect your attitude to your studies?

This question applied to 27 out of the 35 Non-Highers respondents in that they had done more than one course, although not all of them had started at NC and finished up at university. The other eight students had done a one year HNC course. It was necessary to gain an insight into a structural aspect that may have had some influence over their confidence building. My thinking was that although all evidence pointed to the fact that teaching methods and staff support were the main contributors to their increased ability to learn, it may be that structural or systemic aspects had an effect also. This particular systemic aspect was chosen because students had discussed this incremental aspect in class and it was also a characteristic of the three case studies; they had all come to college to do an NC and ended up doing a three year programme and then going on to a final year at university. Also, it could be related to self-confidence; it was one of the factors requiring feedback on the students' course feedback form and it was a feature of further education, distinct from higher education.

The purpose of the question was to ascertain how the system of gaining a recognised certificate at the end of each year (as opposed to a degree which is conferred at the end of three or four years' study and no credit is given for each year) was seen by those who had few previous qualifications. 14 of the 27 interviewees who had completed more than one year, commented that it was confidence building. The "*step by step, close the door, open the door*" approach (David) was considered to be helpful in motivating further study. Because they "*had something at the end of each stage*" (Lesley) they felt a sense of accomplishment. Only three respondents expressed confidence at being able to do the course if it had been a three year course. Some (three) students mentioned that they thought there was only one route to university and that was through Highers. Having Highers legitimates you for university entrance. Although there is no real guarantee that if you have Highers then getting a degree will be easy, the qualification carries a credibility with it that a non-traditional route does not. There is no acknowledged blueprint for HN qualifications leading elsewhere. An HN is accredited differently depending on the degree course and the institution.

The choice of stopping or going on was commented on by one student. This implied a sense of control and autonomy over their future. Several accounts gave the impression of surprise at each stage of success. Some who had gone on to obtain a degree expressed their doubts at being able to do it and there was still an element of surprise in their

voices, as if they couldn't believe it. "*When I came in to do an NC, I didn't think I'd walk out with an HND, much less go to uni*" (Sam). This question on structure, while it is not affected by classroom activity, does provide a system by which the lecturer and student can work together with a shared sense of expectation of standards at each stage. This incremental "*step-by-step*" achievement substantiates confidence-building done in the classroom through other means. It is a corresponding rather than a causal factor in effective learning.

Question 10: Anything to add, questions to ask?

This question was added to encourage the students to participate and allow them an independent voice, adding anything they thought important which may not have been considered by the researcher. Apart from ethical considerations, this was important for the methodology in that the students' voices were central to this investigation. New ideas and issues were encouraged. This research welcomes (almost with open arms) difficult or rogue comments; it could have been in some ways, the essence of the approach. This did not occur. Two people added comments on the value of the placement. This made the researcher assess the nature of the work placement and its relationship to college based learning and, since it had scored highly for both groups on the questionnaire, address the question of why it had been omitted for discussion in the interview, except in a very general way in the first question.

There were two reasons for the omission. The first was that classroom experience and annual student course feedback always indicated placement was important and the second was that I (as researcher) was intent on researching an experience I could "see". My model was for the classroom. In research, some factors need to be axiomatic to draw boundaries around the nature of the research or we would not know where to stop. The worth of the placement experience was one of these "assumed" values. However, the comments from the two students, added to the comments about the value of the placement in the learning experience which ran like a seam through practically every interview, provided evidence for thinking that the classroom experience was both a corollary and a consolidation to the learning experience in placement. "*Practical placement helps keep everything together – kinda like a link but not the main one*" (Carlyn). I would probably disagree with Carlyn in saying it was not the main link.

Placement experience was a critical link for connecting experience, practical examples and theoretical knowledge. The workplace provided the examples, the living stories and the contexts for conceptual understanding. They also acted as a bond between the students. Further study on the relationship between the two learning experiences, college and workplace, is for another study.

There could be many reasons why only two people had anything to add at the end: it was "my agenda"; this was not the classroom (many of the interviewees had been consistently voluble in class discussion); they were tired, some interviews lasted longer than an hour and after a semi-structured interview it may be difficult to think in such a loose, open way.

Interviews with students with Highers

As discussed earlier the only meaningful difference between the two groups was that 17 of those with Highers answered that the main difference between school and college was that they had *responsibility for their own learning*. 25 students with Highers were interviewed. This was the same percentage of the overall survey as those from the sample of Non-Highers.

Interview Questions for those with Highers

I am interested in the relationship between the learning experience at college, your definition of yourself in this process and how those factors relate to your success on your HN course.

In the survey you listed as the 3 most important factors in succeeding at college as: 1) 2) 3)

1)   Can you tell me a bit more about that?

2)   You also stated that the learning experience was different from school in that _____

Can you say a bit more about how that aspect may have helped you to succeed?

3)   (If "responsible for own learning" was not given as answer to question 2) Do you think being responsible for your own learning has any effect on your experience at college?

4)   Anything to add, questions to ask?

Permission to use quotes   yes/no

Permission to attribute quotes to real name   yes/no

The first two questions of these interviews were the same as those of the Non-Highers' interviews. They were asked to elaborate on their three choices in the questionnaire and to discuss their answer to the question on the difference between school and college. The students with Highers answered the first two questions in almost identical terms, reinforcing those of the Non-Highers group. These results confirmed the similarities between the two groups.

Question 3: Do you think being responsible for your own learning had any effect on your experience at college?

Of the 25 interviewees, 17 of the school leavers said that college was about taking responsibility for your own learning. While all of the adult returners (7) agreed with this, most disagreed that it was a new experience. Some of these older students said that they had always been responsible for their own learning. There may be a tenuous link

between age and responsibility for learning but this may also depend on qualifications and factors concerned with the degree of responsibility they have had in their personal lives. What was apparent and more relevant to the learning experience in college was that even though the adult returners said that responsibility for taking on their own learning was not new to them, it was agreed that taking on that responsibility made for more effective learning. Without exception, there was a link between choice, responsibility and better learning.

Choice and ownership

The central issue here was choice. It was not just the choice of being in college as compared with the compulsory aspect of secondary school; it was about what to study, how to study and the freedom to interpret. "*It was about interest, how and what you're going to learn*" (Isla). This impression of freedom within study was not uncommon within the 25 interviews. Ruth maintained that "*there were no boundaries, it was about research and interpretation –there were no right or wrong answers.*" Eleanor agreed with this, saying, there were "*no parameters: I learned stuff I had no idea about.*" Of course there were boundaries; this impression of freedom required further questioning to reach a better understanding.

On probing, it appeared that this "intellectual" freedom was seen as the lecturer giving guidance and support but not imposing rigid barriers. The ideology of the course/classroom was one of exploration and examination, finding your own way through the mine of information and the process that turns that into knowledge. Yvonne expressed this as "*I tried to make things happen...to cut the jigsaw piece to fit the puzzle*". And Derek talked of a larger and wider scope where "*the teacher isn't being so specific so you had to be more general. You learnt more because the scope was larger and you had to look at the wider group of information and in so doing you found out other things and different views.*" So, by being given wide (some less confident students often termed this as "vague") parameters, the students learned by making choices and decisions. There is a sense here that the students are in control and find the independence in making these cognitive choices almost liberating.

This opportunity to make intellectual choices and explore relatively freely, may be one of the significant factors for success but it requires knowing how to learn and the ability

to apply that to a new learning context. Amanda said she was a better learner because she "*knew how to do it for myself and can take my time. 'Dig deeper' is better without strict guidelines.*" Independent learning was perhaps a greater achievement for this student because she was dyslexic. The link with choice and responsibility was more than a student's self-determination – an academic rite of passage – it was a cognitive process which enabled them to think about information and know what they needed to learn. Amanda was learning "*for herself*": for a student with dyslexia, this must have been seen as an achievement. Her comment on "*dig(ging) deeper*" comes from the class lecturer who, in guided discussion, would challenge the students to think about issues by looking beyond (and below) the obvious and superficial answer – perhaps even an answer the same lecturer had supplied. In doing this the lecturer was teaching two things; one was to employ critical thinking skills and the second was to look beyond the accepted and authoritative answer. Many students from both groups use the term "deep thinking".

Kirsty saw the impact of independent learning being that,"*it made you a better learner by finding your own way of learning.*" Once again, this ability to find your own way related to transferability of knowledge. It didn't ensure that transfer happened but it did mean that the skills for it were there in a more lasting form. Sharon suggested that responsibility was about "*independence. You needed a ladder. You need to make that effort and then you find out whether you really want to learn that and then you find out what kind of a learner you really are – what motivates you. There's a graded ladder again, you think more deeply and you're more motivated to do it because of subject interest.*" The choice was also whether to participate in classroom discussion. While most of the interviewees (both sets) suggested that participation was paramount for learning, since it was not a requirement to pass the course, it was up to the students to take responsibility for that participation. "*Choice is responsibility*" (Scott).

The secondary issue was ownership: the learning and work produced was "*yours*" (Pamela). It took on more meaning and was remembered and used: "*You were doing it all on your own so there was greater ownership. It helped with "deeper learning."* The uniqueness of the work contributed to the understanding: "*Your work isn't like anyone else's*" (Susan F.) As Rogers (cited in Moon 1999: 124) says:

Self-initiated learning which involves the whole persona of the learner – feelings as well as intellect – is the most lasting and pervasive…An important element in these situations is that the learner knows it is his own learning and can thus hold on to it or relinquish it in the face of a more profound learning, without having to turn to some authority for corroboration of his judgement.

Another issue that surfaced in the interviews with those students with Highers was their knowledge of the role of the lecturer. "*At college individuality was realized – everyone has different learning styles, different strengths. Your (the lecturer's) job was to tease (this) out and it worked.*" Nicci's comments were the most analytical in how the class (students and teacher) dynamics worked: it was "*relaxed – as in I picture us sitting around the tables and you telling us a story and using bits and pieces and someone else telling a story and you fit it together…we had a common purpose.*" This image of teacher and learners as storytellers will be examined further in the section on discourse (Chapter 6). A number of the students commented on aspects of the classroom culture which contributed to their learning; aspects which they saw as deliberate teaching methods. Sharon, now a primary teacher, commented that it wasn't "*given to you on a plate.*" She discussed the graded independence from school, through college to a post-graduate course. "*At school you were given what to read… at post-grad you do it on your own.*" The commonality of purpose was a comment on sharing; Nicci says, adding to the above, "*we were all there to achieve the same goal…everybody shared information – we got together with stories in the break*". This group singleness of purpose echoes those comments of the students with no Highers. A common purpose appeared to strengthen the learning process.

Nicci's comment sums up many of the factors for success. Commonality, shared stories, teacher as connector and link maker; what it also shows is that Nicci had learned to be an acute observer. Observation was an explicit way of learning in placement but it appears that the students transferred these skills to their own college classroom. It may have been facilitated by the teacher asking the students to reflect on the structure and events at the end of each class. Analysing the lecturers' role seemed to make them better learners; one student who had some difficulty in adjusting to self-directed learning at the beginning said at the end of her successful HND that the teaching method helped in that there was a recognition "*when confirmation is needed, not more information*". What

Alison K. is saying is that students may need their ideas and thinking confirmed rather than a supply of more facts. It seems to me that further education often falls into the trap of telling them more rather than helping them process the information that they are just beginning to grasp. It is probably easier to be a conveyer of information rather than a teacher of thinking. This same student, Alison, said, "*Support is a method: I needed the encouragement for confidence.*" One student linked learning to both the subject and self-knowledge: "*I learned more about the subject and about myself,*" (Tracey F.).

Summary and conclusions from the questionnaires and both sets of interviews
The following themes emerged. They are highlighted in italics throughout.

Increase in confidence in their learning ability was attributed mainly, but not exclusively, to **support from staff**. This support was different for each student. For some it was encouragement, ("you can do it"); for some, it was the "open door" policy of always being available; for others it was the open acceptance of their ideas as valid and worth listening to. It was a style, an approach and a method which contributed to an ethos of the classroom that was receptive to their individual thinking, which praised them for their efforts and which made them more confident to take risks in their learning. Risks were dependent on the level of self-confidence; for some, it was speaking out, for others it was challenging ideas, and for others, it was determining the limits of their own research investigations. These aspects were mentioned on the questionnaire on 42 occasions and constituted consistent themes running through the interviews. At times, it appeared as if the students thought that staff support was a teaching method.

Although **teaching methods** were rated in the top three factors for success, there were no suggestions on techniques except discussion. One commented on visual methods, another on good feedback and several on variety of methods for maintaining interest; handouts were mentioned by three people only. The interviewees preferred to talk in larger terms than approaches to activity-based learning. An essential part of the learning was taking part in the dialogic nature of the classroom experience. Talking and exchanging ideas was a "must". The mechanics of this appeared to be irrelevant to them, as long as the activity fostered interaction, a freedom of expression and a shared sense of learning together. There was a sense of discussion being a serious, scholarly activity.

Practical application through the use of *practical placement* was seen as important for consolidating learning and making it real. It was a pivot and a context which provided story material whereby ideas could be illustrated and theories demonstrated.

Communal learning was another element of effective learning. There was much discussion on how the group worked together and the importance of *peer support*. This was sometimes expressed as swapping skills or just supporting one another in terms of knowledge and understanding. Sharing in discussion was also seen as critical for learning and for group cohesion. At times, there was almost a dogmatic insistence that if you didn't "join in", you lost out.

Ownership and taking responsibility for your own learning linked with making choices and recognizing the individuality of the student's work. There was a complex thread here in that the students seemed to be saying that they exercised judgement in making choices and taking on board the responsibility of learning but that there was also acknowledgement that they were being given the freedom to learn and think to a greater depth. They expressed a qualitative link between being given "more" and "digging deeper"; determining the boundaries of their own learning meant more complete learning for them. It appeared that they were saying that when limitations are placed on learning, it reduces the individual learning experience hence lessening the opportunities for making intellectual choices.

Telling stories was used as a way to illustrate theory and make abstract ideas, real, but students' personal narratives also contributed to learning by changing perceptions and ways of seeing. Many students attested to the fact that their self-perception had changed. Learning about themselves as well as making sense of their world was achieved, in part, through *storytelling.*

Personal factors featured in the form of age and stage of life (some expressed this as "maturity") and how college came at the "right time" for them. All the students with no Highers had reached the appropriate time in their life and this learning "readiness" coincided with their personal circumstances. Even the school leavers who had no Highers knew they had reached the end of their school career at 16. Proper timing is

important in that even if you create the "perfect" conditions for learning, if the "situational" aspects are not right (Cross 1981) then the dispositional ones may not be enough for them to succeed. ***Interest in the subject*** was another factor over which the college had little control but which was clearly a key factor in their success, particularly for the adult returners with no Highers.

What was nowhere in evidence was any mention of **resources** and **assessments**. Since these were two of the ten factors for success in the first question of the questionnaire, it is significant that they were ignored. There was a tangential reference to assessments in the acknowledgement that each time you passed one level, you gained confidence to go on to the next, but there was no connection made between resources, assessment and learning. It may be that (and I am drawing from knowledge gleaned from classroom discussion) these two areas are outside students' control and they are the domain of the lecturer. It may demonstrate the relationship between the students and the lecturer in that they leave these concrete evidential things in trust to the lecturer. It may also be that assessments are seen as not about learning because you are allowed to make mistakes in learning, whereas mistakes in assessments have unpleasant consequences.

No interviewee gave me a classroom recipe for successful learning. It was too impressionistic and qualitative an experience for them to express in quantifiable terms. Although it could be defined, it was more of a definition of a relationship: how that student interpreted and internalised the experience could not be expressed in terms of components. It was more of an organic relational answer: *my experience of teaching and learning is about my relationship with the rest of the class and the lecturer, using the information and the networks in the class within my personal framework of learning and making connections*. Once again, the "tips for teachers" were elusive. While strong and consistent themes emerged, they were looking less like a list and more like a set of principles.

CHAPTER 6

DISCOURSE AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Five statements could be extrapolated from the data from the previous two chapters.

The students attributed their success to staff support and in some cases, peer support.

They gained confidence in their learning ability.

They became self-directed learners.

They learned through discussion and story-telling.

They saw themselves as learning with others.

These five themes will be addressed in detail in the following two chapters on discourse and learning communities and learner identity, before outlining a model in the final chapter.

Discourse

This chapter examines the nature of discourse and relationships within classroom discourse. The metaphors the students used in their interviews are discussed and the relationship between discourse, group learning and gender is examined. This chapter explores the broad hypothesis that effective learning takes place in groups through discussion.

> Discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, where and with what authority (Ball quoted in Coffield 2004: 131).

As discussed in the methodology chapter (section 2.2) there are many definitions of discourse depending on the discipline under discussion. In this study it means the language the students used in classroom discussion and the perspectives and cultural identities they brought to that discussion. Talk comes in many socio-cultural disguises and the nature of the discourse depends on who is in the group, what the subject is, and where it is occurring. Knowing what to say, how to say it and (more or less) knowing how it will be received are all characteristics of discussion techniques. To further complicate the discourse question, students' metaphors were used in the interpretation of the interview data.

Metaphors we live and learn by

Metaphors were used by the students when they were explaining the complex process of learning. It is possible that metaphors were used because they explain a conceptual idea through an image. Ideas, especially ones about the elusive process of learning are often expressed through metaphor in everyday speech.

> Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and
> act, is fundamentally metaphoric in nature. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3)

The internal tension expressed by a metaphor allows us to have insights through the use of comparisons, ambiguity and juxtaposing the familiar with the unfamiliar. The use of metaphor to express an idea often leads to it sparking off another idea. It is both a conclusion and a catalyst. Metaphors reflect our cultural and social assumptions and we often express what is difficult to express, in metaphor. They make abstract ideas more "real" and therefore easier to understand.

> Since much of our social reality is understood in metaphorical terms, and since
> our conception of the physical world is partly metaphorical, metaphor plays a
> very significant role in determining what is real for us. (Lakoff and Johnson
> 1980: 146)

As discussed in the previous section on methodology, the interviewees used metaphors predominantly when describing their thinking and learning; these metaphors often implied action: from the obvious metaphors such as "*pick each other's brains*" (Billy), "*bouncing ideas off each other*" (Helen), "*occupying my mind*" (Liz), "*gets my brain ticking…someone might spark off an idea*" (Sam) to more idiosyncratic ones: "*Teaching has to be movement and louder than sitting in a chair*" (Patricia). This last metaphor captures the classroom style that can be interactive and stimulating. The same student also said that you "*need to go into avenues to open up thinking*". Apart from the comment on teaching being "*louder than sitting*" most of the metaphors are not original and could be said to be almost clichés. What is important here is not their lack of originality, but the fact that the students used them to discuss the more elusive aspects of the learning process. One student used the expression "*drawing from it*" to indicate how

discussion always provided some form of learning but that an active engagement to establish what was useful was required. In other words, they were not passive receivers. They needed to use reasoned judgement and react to others' comments. David described the intellectual activity in the classroom as a river or a tidal flow: *"(the learning) naturally flows from class (to practice) – one flows into the other – lecturers and students connect back and forward."* These images imply movement, connection and cohesion. The fluidity of the interaction between students and lecturers and between sites of learning indicates a structure which enhanced the learning. Many of the students talked about it all "*coming together*" rather than the course being seen as bits and pieces of disconnected information. This makes the process seem organic and "natural" as if it came into being through some force other than an explicit teaching one. This, from the point of view of the lecturer and the observer, was not true: teaching may be described as an intervention in the dialogue that was happening in the classroom but this dialogue was mainly (not always) orchestrated and planned and carefully guided using principles of critical thinking and speech analysis.

Doors were a common metaphor. Here again, there was a sense of movement; they were either opening or closing. When describing her school experience, Therese said it was as if "*someone had opened a door and then closed it again…as if it was a double door"* . David also used the door image to explain how understanding is a graded process: "*you understand step by step, close the door, open the door.*" John explained his rise from "*no O levels*" to BA by saying, "*being a student has helped unlock something that was always there*". Scott said there were "*no closed doors"* when he talked about the level of staff support he was given. Margaret M. added to this when she talked about the attitude of the lecturer as "*always has an open door"*. This indicated availability for support as well as an intellectual liberalism which encouraged open-mindedness. For these students, with a history of educational failure, doors must have represented opportunities which they may have thought had been closed to them. They may, also, have represented a new way of thinking about themselves. The door metaphor resonates with McGivney's (1993: 61) use of women returners being at the "threshold" stage. (See Chapter 7 for the full quotation.)

There were also conventional metaphors of journeys, roads and travel. Some used the notion of travelling to express a point of view: "*If you're coming from a different angle,*

it doesn't mean you're wrong" (Aileen). What Aileen is alluding to here is that different perspectives and ways of looking at an idea or a practical problem added to the intellectual life of the classroom and that within the class there was a wide interpretation of the acceptability of comments. It is similar to Billy's comment that the lecturer "*always took something*" from any student input. This contributed to their feeling that they and their ideas were "*valued*". Davina used the travel image to describe an intellectual journey: "*the journey to the decision was important*". By this she meant that the learning process (and the thinking that constituted this) was as important (if not more) than the outcome. Davina's metaphor was so apt in its summation of the importance of the process that it became a central underlying concept of the thesis. It indicated that the students thought the process of learning was more important than the content and skills. What they took away was the experience of thinking with others which changed the way they made sense of their world.

The journey metaphors indicate a length of time and a movement from one place to another. Most students had a sense that there was some development and change in this journey. There was a structure involving a starting point and a destination. This destination was not always literal (that is, to get to the end of the course); sometimes they were describing a more ephemeral journey. The metaphor of learning being a journey is well known and well used (almost hackneyed) but it appeared to be valid for four of the students interviewed. Ward and Edwards (2002: 14) base their study of people learning basic skills on the "learning journey" metaphor. Although it may have lost its metaphoric status due to common usage in other contexts, the journey image seems to take on its metaphoric properties in my study in representing the abstract as concrete. Intellectual activity is elusive and difficult to describe in terms of behaviour. It is one of the factors that make teaching so mysterious and frustrating. The teacher never knows what is being learned: behaviourist approaches are not adequate to describe the complexities of the acquisition of knowledge. When the students were describing their learning, these metaphors seemed to be satisfactory vehicles to explain that messy and ephemeral aspect of learning.

The metaphors were also concerned with describing the lecturer as a leader or guide. Margaret said, "*You were steering us to a right, if there is a right, answer.*" Billy's view of the lecturer as asking for input and accepting and then making comments relevant to

the subject was common among the interviewees. There was no suggestion of there being a right or wrong contribution: the lecturer's job was to make it relevant. To refer to the quotation on the first page of this chapter, the rules of this classroom discourse were that everyone had authority, although not equal (as with any group) in every context, and what they learned was appropriate times and content for speaking. Billy's view of the lecturer's role was similar to others who saw the lecturer as being the one who "*tied*" it all together. This has implications for the teaching model in how much and what kind of direction is necessary.

Metaphors were used around the subject of self-esteem and self-image. Dorothy attributed her personal development to staff support: "*they gave me self-confidence*". Others attributed a new self-image to their college experience; "I *had always been the disabled child's mother*" (Elaine McN.). Now her identity was tied up with being a student and eventually, a classroom support worker. Liz felt the classroom gave her an opportunity for expression: "*our experience from our point of view*". While this is not necessarily an image it contains a seeming contradiction in that you may question how else you can describe your experience except from your point of view. What she is implying is that firstly, it was valued, and secondly, it was hers and thirdly, it had a validity outside the personal expression. This student came to college when she was 40 and was working in a nursery but she had been used to people interpreting and speaking for her and, perhaps, misinterpreting what she was saying.

Development and stages of success were seen as "*stepping stones*" (Helen), "*step by step*" (David) and moving up the ladder: " *when you get up one rung of the ladder you have the confidence to go on,*" (Davina). This sense of movement and progression is common in careers and education; the students saw their learning as a moving entity, stages of progress and development. This development was seen as accumulative but it also suggests the way these students learned to believe in their academic ability. In the question on the incremental nature of the course, they generally agreed that breaking the course down into yearly achievements (NC, then HNC, then HND) helped them build up their confidence. Only three students said they could have done the course in a three year stretch.

Metaphors and storytelling

Learning is an activity. Some students used the image of knowledge being something that could move: "*it didn't just stay in the classroom. I could hear a quote and make reference to it.*" Elizabeth meant that when something happened in the workplace she heard the lecturer's comments and attached them to the event. (Some secondary students have told me that this happened to them in exams.) This voice recall is an interesting phenomenon and may be dependent on the type of language used and its resonant qualities. It is possible that by using sound bites for memory retention and stories which have a familiar structure (Once upon a time there was…) the student retains the fact or the narrative application so that they "pop up" readily when triggered by a question or an incident. If the teacher attaches concepts to application through stories, it may be that this is one way of reaching understanding and embedding it into the student's schema.

We store knowledge as narrative (Hunter 1991). Stories form logical patterns, but whether because of habitual knowledge from childhood or because they reflect a cultural attitude to cognition, is too large a topic for this study. My students remembered concepts, theories and ideas through the stories told in class. The job of the tutor was to point out where the stories told another story about general patterns of behaviour. As Bruner (2007) says, stories help us to go beyond remembering facts; they help us to engage in "what if" thinking; a creative exploration of engaging with facts and estimating probable outcomes all in the familiar form of plot, character, setting and circumstance.

> Why are we so intellectually dismissive towards narrative?...treat(ing) it as rather a trashy, if entertaining, way of thinking about and talking about what we do with our minds? Storytelling performs the dual cultural functions of making the strange familiar and ourselves private and distinctive. If pupils are encouraged to think about the different outcomes that could have resulted from a set of circumstances, they are demonstrating useability of knowledge about a subject. Rather than just retaining knowledge and facts, they go beyond them to use their imaginations to think about other outcomes, as they don't need the completion of a logical argument to understand a story. (Bruner in Crace interview 2007: 11)

Nikki's comment is full of metaphors and describes the essence of storytelling and its place in learning: "I picture us sitting around the tables and you telling us a story and using bits and pieces and someone else telling a story and you fit it together." Nicci's point is that what the lecturer draws from the stories and how the students see the connection between narratives, gives the process a cohesion. Learning from stories is useful because students not only recognize the familiarity of structure and chronology, so retention is effective, but they also consider it a legitimate way of retaining, maintaining and using information to think. Stories contain real people doing things whereas concepts and theories come from text-books. Some of the students interviewed had a disregard for text-books. (Esther's comment, *"Opinions don't come from text-books"*, shows the disdain that many of the other students expressed.) The lecturer's job is to take theories and make stories and then prove that text-books can be useful once you know how to "read" them.

These metaphorical statements above tell us something about how the students viewed classroom learning, how they saw relationships with the group, the lecturer and the practice and how their personal development and sense of self acted within this framework. Life is often described as a journey. The students described their learning and education as a journey. Their metaphors may suggest that they have unconsciously absorbed a vision of learning as a part of their life and are trying to articulate the difference between learning as active lifelong engagement and the more passive, pragmatic view of skill-based certificate-driven FE. In reference to the next chapter, they may have absorbed this view into their understanding of their learner identity.

Methodological implications

Why trust metaphors?
Metaphors convey concepts. They link the concrete to the concept. They are useful for thinking in that they fuse a visual image with an idea. By seeing abstract ideas as pictures, by bringing them within a more primary and sensory experience, metaphors represent areas of experience which are not wholly cerebral. Somehow this gives them credibility. Language that emanates from our sensory experience, appears to contain less artifice and conscious cleansing. Cameron (1995) calls it "verbal hygiene". This may be true for this group of FE students in particular because they were, generally, plain-

speaking. They were not using these figures of speech as oratorical flourishes. In fact, they were somewhat disdainful of this type of verbal behaviour. Therefore their use seemed to imply that, for the student, they were as accurate a picture as they could give to the researcher – as close to the truth as this imprecise method could get. My task as researcher was to lift these expressions from the text and read them as more than just a colourful form of communication.

> At its most profound, the meaning of human life is carried in metaphor. For few of us are the metaphors we live by explicit; we do not usually have any conscious awareness of living out anything beyond what seems to be our literal experience. Yet ultimately, it is the metaphorical sense we make of our living that gives the journey its direction, its sense of progression or development, its turning points, changes and passages, the meaning of a beginning and end. (Salmon quoted in Tight, M. 1995: 394)

As with all metaphors, once they have become part of common parlance, it is difficult to say whether the students are using the metaphor because it has meaning particular to this context, or whether they are using it because it has become just another catch-phrase. It may be a way of using language to prevent further exploration of ideas that cause unease through the "naturalizing" of language. (Many "isms" do this.) Using metaphors as ciphers, essentially dead metaphors which have become clichés, is limiting and not useful for a qualitative study. In the case of these interviewees, this does not seem to be the case for two reasons. The first is that they used these metaphors when they were discussing the more difficult to define areas of learning. At other times, in the interview, their speech was plain and devoid of figurative speech. Secondly, they used the metaphors to elaborate on their thinking. The metaphor appeared to pin down some processes which were difficult to describe in concrete terms. Because metaphors are seated somewhere between the sensory and the cerebral, perhaps capturing both responses, there appeared to be no conscious intent on the part of the interviewees (and ex-students) to please the teacher/researcher. There was an ease and familiarity; they slipped into metaphors when the abstract idea and their emotional relationship with it were difficult to capture in more literal terms.

On reflection, the researcher tended to trust the metaphoric statement as a linguistic attempt to get at the truth. These metaphors used by the students were felt as much as thought. It seemed that they revealed a greater truth than the literal statements not because they told me more at a surface level, but because they had a deeper significance. They appeared to come from a deeper cognitive level. If we refer to the literature review, the gaps in the research (Cross 1981; Field 2003; McGivney 1993; 1996; Tight 1995) were in the more detailed areas of learning in these groups, because this type of qualitative data requires an analysis of such a potentially abstruse process.

Because the description of the learning required a metacognitive distance, and an objective as well as subjective stance, metaphor was a useful linguistic device. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) contend that a metaphor is a linguistic structure which follows rules: it contains both subjectivism and objectivism. It combines the subjective internal aspects of understanding and the objective desire to understand the external world. Pedagogical principles are concerned with this also. The use of experiential learning to arrive at a more objective truth is one meaning behind Bruner's ideas on being sensitive to hunches and transferring these hunches to the more logical parts of the mind so that they can be tested. It indicated a relationship between thought and language which contributed to the depth of the data. These ideas, already discussed in Chapter 1, are germane to this research.

> … hunches, combinatorial products of his metaphoric activity. If he is not fearful of these products of his own subjectivity, he will go so far as to tame the metaphors that have produced the hunches, tame them in the sense of shifting them from the left hand to the right hand by rendering them into notions that can be tested. (my underlining) Bruner (1979: 4)

In a sense, the students were providing me with their hunches expressed as metaphors and it was the task of the researcher to render these metaphoric expressions of the nature of learning into more "testable" ideas.

Against metaphor

> The ambiguous, open and duplicitous nature of language prevents any final closure of meaning. (Chappell et al 2003: 43)

Let's look at "duplicitous" from the quote above. Chappell says that the slippery nature of language means it is difficult to interpret with certainty, but are actions any less duplicitous? If discourse is one form of cognitive and social behaviour, how can we justify seeing it as less ontologically important than any other form of behaviour? Action and speech both come from that invisible source, the mind. This takes us into another cul-de-sac along the uncertain route of my journey. While there can be no "final closure of meaning", it is reasonable to assume that the same uncertainty occurs in more areas than discourse interpretation.

Actions are informed by conceptual thinking and we can understand at least partly, that what students do is informed by what they think and what linguistic structures they use to retell these acts. The interviews and questionnaires were analysed to pick out constructions and metaphors which gave another level to the understanding of their thinking. Whether this small-scale textual analysis can be seen as a system of analysis is debatable (Denzin 1994): the reason that this level of textual analysis was used was because the students chose to use metaphors particularly when discussing the type of thinking and learning that they found stimulating and effective. As previously indicated, the study's legitimacy depended on the students' words for its direction. There was no attempt on the part of the interviewer to encourage this choice, nor were the interview questions expressed in metaphorical terms.

It could be said, of course, that the classroom ethos and the tutor may have been biased towards the use of metaphor since this was a common teaching device. In class discussion, comments which contained useful metaphors were extracted and used to illustrate and make accessible some difficult ideas and theories. So, whereas research conditions prevented the interviewer's use of metaphor within the actual questions

asked, the tutor's presence as interviewer may have tacitly elicited this type of response because of its familiarity in classroom discourse.

Using metaphor as a method of inquiry could be questioned because of its ambivalent nature. Its strength as a mode of communication and a method of cognitive inquiry is also its weakness. It unites two often dissimilar ideas and creates a new insight; it allows for expression through visual images and picks up on the nuances and non-literal elements of ideas. It would seem to be the precise vehicle for discussing the more ephemeral aspects of learning. However, for research, which requires sources of evidence, documented answers to questions on *how* learning takes place, it may appear insubstantial. The reasons for using metaphor were that the students used them and since this research's primary resource was the students' words, this was methodologically sound. In addition to this, metaphors provided a metacognitive aspect to the students' observations and gave the researcher a way of thinking at a deeper level about the larger events that surrounded these classroom insights.

Discourse and gender

Since the women outnumbered the men on this course by approximately ten to one and eight to one in the interviews, it was relevant to examine research on women. Feminist studies (Cameron 1990; Belenky 1986) on discourse say that women organise their talk differently from men. There is not the same competition for space, "they are more co-operative and less hierarchical, more supportive of their interlocutors and less concerned with competing for the floor" (Cameron 1990: 25). Cameron says that women's speech may be interpreted in two ways: dominance, in that their powerlessness is reflected in the way they negotiate talk, or difference, in that they are using discourse in non-confrontational, non-adversarial ways, choosing alternative ways of communicating. Applying these perspectives to the students (both male and female) in my study, it appeared that their discursive styles were affected by many factors, only one of which was gender. The males in the group had the same discursive styles as the women. What made male and female students similar was that these were people (men and woman) who had not been listened to, particularly in an educational setting. Many had not had their ideas valued (see results of questionnaire) and it was a new experience for them to speak with, and to, a group of other adults, be listened to and have their ideas considered. In fact, it was so frightening a prospect that many found it a difficult task.

As Cameron says, their ways of talking were indicative of their levels of self-confidence and that this was an expression of some form of dominance and also that they took on different ways of dealing with the expression of their ideas. Where my group departed from this analysis was that, when they realised "they had a voice", they could sometimes be adversarial and it seemed, from an observer's point of view, to be an expression of a confidence in their ideas and their position within the group. Elaine McN. said, *"I was happy to talk and disagree. I wouldn't do this before."* After gaining her HND, Margaret said she was, *"confident to voice my opinions at work."* When John was asked whether gaining a degree had given him a "voice", his answer confirmed that acquired status through external validation was both a burden and a source of pride. He put a cultural interpretation on this "voicelessness" and lack of validity. When he said that his pride in his degree was the "*yoke of Celtism*" he meant that being Scottish, he needed public affirmation through a degree. While both males and females in my study took on this understanding and demeanour of the voiceless, it was their lack of qualifications that seemed to determine their position in the discourse debate.

Leicester (2001) comments on the value of learning through anecdote and autobiography, saying that gender has epistemological implications. Women stress the importance of networks and value learning through these context specific narratives. The "locatedness" (Barr 1999: 5) of stories is important.

> Women use intuition, metaphor and emotion in their (valid) judgements and understanding…Metaphors are powerful tools for understanding and encouraging lateral thinking. (Leicester 2001: 60)

My students understood the place of these factors (intuition, metaphor and emotion) in their storytelling.

Metaphors have a cultural validity in that they reflect shared beliefs, values and understandings in our culture (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). They can reshape and reform assumed truths and by their cognitive juxtaposition see old understandings in new lights. Within a classroom community which shares these metaphors, the linguistic expression can have binding properties: if we share metaphors, we may share a way of looking at

the world. This is not to say that we all see the world as the same but that, in any group gathering, there is an understanding of the discursive frameworks being used by the group. It is this communal understanding that helped the students alter their attitudes and ways of thinking about behaviours and its complexities (even the acknowledgement that behaviour was complex was a new realisation for some). By sharing stories, inside and outside the classroom, they did more than exchange ideas: they were building up language communities.

Discourse and discussion groups

Discourse is more than a thinking tool. It builds up a sense of shared experience through shared referents. "We were all there to achieve the <u>same</u> goal, we had a <u>common</u> purpose, everybody <u>shared</u> information; we got <u>together</u> with stories in breaks" (Nicci). Sometimes, as in the previous section, these referents are expressed as metaphors. By using similar terms and concepts which often emanate from the subject taught, students build up a shorthand which is essential for creating networks of trust which can result in reciprocal behaviour, or vice versa: whether it be exchanging ideas, taking part in a discussion or supporting through skills. Nicci's comment about getting together with stories in the breaks indicates that activity which was a normal part of classroom learning was also occurring outside the classroom in free time. This may have meant that relationships and bonding occurring outside the classroom was contributing to the quality of the ongoing learning. Some of these students were part-time and came together once a week only, so there was not a lot of time over the year to get to know their fellow students. As Belenky (1986: 119) says, learning through discourse is about getting to know who is talking. Language is social and only useful in context. Language has to be seen as surrounding and inhabiting text; to be a useful method of investigation we must see it as "language in use" (Cameron and Low 1999: 4).

The students in my class learned to trust what each other said. They knew what paths had been taken to reach the decision and could identify with the thinking. The voice was authenticated through shared cultural and cognitive backgrounds. This could have acted as a way of entrenching prejudice and closed thinking but when it is accompanied by a questioning and reflective approach in a learning classroom, the personal knowledge acts as a further understanding. It furthers the concept of Belenky's (1986) emphasis on knowing *who* is talking. Helen said she found confidence in the group and Roddy (adult

day release student, ex-army) gained understanding, *"It only seemed to gel when you were working as a team."* Roslyn also "*used people in the class to know I'm on the right track.*" Margaret "*used*" what people had to say. There is an activity surfacing again in these metaphors. Pauline described discussion as "*not just sitting*" when, of course, they were sitting, but she saw talking as doing. This adult returner, mother of two, also said that it "*changes you*". When there was a tendency to want to work in isolation there was a recognition that group learning gave something more to the whole experience. "*I'd want to go in a corner but groups are better for communality*" Emma. *"We're all in the same boat" (*Susan) . Aileen said that group cohesion was useful in that everybody could gain in a group and that they "*ran by things in the tea break; we were all travelling down the same road*".

As a social process, then, the students saw their telling of stories as building cohesion and solidarity in the group, once again confirming the positive aspects of group learning. Building up networks, inside and outside the classroom, learning to share and reciprocate became the norms of the classroom. These are all products of social capital. To make the claim that the group was rich in social capital is beyond the scope of this study. However, the students did gain in confidence in using networks, they did understand the value of sharing and reciprocity within the class group. It can be assumed that they extended some of these aspects to other areas of their lives. We will return to this link with social capital in Chapter 9.

Language and learning communities

It seems to me that metaphor shows an understanding of what is being communicated by acknowledging shared referents; using metaphor shows that the communicants are familiar with the discourse of the subject. The use of metaphor also indicates evidence of conceptual thinking; we can read into the language the relationship between word and thought. We live with, and think in, concepts. These are often expressed metaphorically. A linguistic community can "own" metaphors; they can share language and referents. Resnick describes discourse communities as:

> …communities that share preferred ways of speaking or writing and that judge the quality of ideas in part as a function of the extent to which they are felicitously expressed, according to community standards. Scholarly disciplines constitute

discourse communities, as do ordinary people who share ways of talking and reasoning with people like themselves. The phenomenon of *code-switching* shows that people can belong to multiple discourse communities, each enabling and constraining thought in different ways. (Resnick 1991: 8)

Two students mentioned telling stories in breaks and everyone who was interviewed was adamant that discussion was the central component of their successful learning. Presumably some "code-switching" (using different forms of talk) went on in the tea-breaks and even though the stories they told in the canteen were similar to those classroom narratives, about their work, home and college, it was done in a different way. What Resnick is saying is that all these sources of talk contribute to a way of learning. In the tea-break they may have used less formal, though probably no less structured, forms of discourse. Patterns of language use, using the same terms and subject specific vocabulary and taking part in a discussion with specific understandings common to the group, are factors which are to a greater or lesser degree present in all classrooms. It is possible that in this particular HNSLN classroom, specific terms, metaphors and analogies were used more frequently and explicitly as a teaching tool. The HNSLN students saw taking part in discussion as critical for the shared beliefs of the group, for self-validation and self-analysis. As Billy said, "*You have to be involved in discussion. It's a must."* They learned about themselves and others. Taking part was essential for group bonding, learning, exchanging and thinking through ideas and experiences. Stories play a major part in decision-making in communities of practice.

These stories, then, are packages of situated knowledge…To acquire a store of appropriate stories and, even more importantly, to know what are appropriate occasions for telling them…(Lave and Wenger 2002: 120)

Knowing the appropriate context for telling stories was part of the learning process. The questions in the interview that related to the students' sense of classroom culture were the generic comments on the teaching/learning process and the questions based on Bruner's (1986) idea of learning being a communal activity and sharing attitudes towards the learning events. The negotiation and construction of meaning in classrooms is a constant and dialectical process.

If we see the classroom as a language community and if we can further this connection and see that shared language communities can learn better than those students in an environment where this group sense is not nurtured, can we make an argument for the importance of enhancing discursive skills? The students learned discussion skills and communication techniques. They learned to role-model themselves on the lecturer's approach: "*I was scaffolding with others*" (Therese). They were also aware of the process of cognitive activity. "*Someone would <u>take</u> my idea and <u>use it</u>*" (Emma). This comment was made in a gesture of generosity and said with some degree of self-pride. Sharing ideas and allowing someone to use yours, were seen as an acknowledgement of your value and worth as a class colleague. It is also an example of cognitive development: being able to recognise when someone else has not only adopted your idea, but also developed it, shows a degree of intellectual insight. "*The most successful and lasting learning*" (Margaret) was done as a communal activity. It aided memory. Many students agreed with Margaret's assessment.

On a different level, this sharing illustrates the dialogic nature of language. It is as if the student is taking the words right out of the mouths of peers and making them his or her own.

> The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word…Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language…but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's concrete contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (Bakhtin quoted in Wertsch 1991: 96)

As discussed in Chapter 5 in the interview analysis, what became obvious to me was that one of the transitions that was hardest to make and, in some cases, most vehemently resisted by some students was a change in the use of language they were using in the classroom and having to use in work placement. They understood that there was a college voice, a workplace voice and perhaps another one that they used in more informal situations. Some of the students were more linguistically "sensitive" than others. (For example, the two case studies in Chapter 8, Roslyn and Elaine, displayed

very different linguistic characteristics from each other.) There is an understanding of sociolinguistics in knowing when to employ the "correct" social register (Hymes 1971). It is what Hymes would describe as linguistic "competence": knowing the social rules of the use of language. One of the concerns of the study became the importance of the underlying relationship between social and educational background, language and legitimacy in the academic world.

When students take non-traditional routes into higher education they make more than an intellectual leap. What may be more difficult for some is the social leap. This social leap is apparent in their discourse. This is not to say that this is the only area in which it manifests itself. However, it is the one that is most visible (if an oral/aural sense can be visible). In many ways it was a doubly difficult task for these HNSLN students to change their linguistic behaviour. They had to discuss their own learning process within a context of learning in others. Although they may have known the specific vocabulary, they were required to take a doubly reflective stance and look at their learning through a medium about which they were learning. It is to hold a way of looking at yourself within a context of unknowns. What this research argues for is an understanding of that process and how we can help facilitate that change in language use so that it is not taken on as a linguistic mask nor is seen as a betrayal of class roots (Field 2003), but as a means by which students can think better. This type of language is used in conducting interviews, it is the way ideas can be expressed in class and the way essays are written. In making themselves more linguistically versatile by having a repertoire of registers the students would be able to negotiate better within these "multiple discourse communities"(Resnick 1991: 8).

It appeared that the students began to think differently – more conceptually, and with reservations. To do this kind of thinking usually requires a different form of discourse (Bernstein 1961). Understanding this linguistic acquisition process means acknowledging that discourse is partly social and partly cognitive. It is possible that we use one type of language to nourish and generate ideas and another to take that thinking through to connecting theories, making generalisations and transferring knowledge. In teaching those students who left school at 16 with few or no qualifications, the atmosphere has to be *"relaxed"* (see Table 1 in Chapter 4): so does the language. Gallagher et al (2000: 65) saw the language as "crucial" to successful learning. This

does not mean that lecturers have to adopt a preponderance of whatever adolescent phrases are in vogue. It does mean we have to acknowledge ideas when they appear in a form which is not recognisable as academic discourse and then bring that idea to a level of discourse whereby students can learn to think on a more profound level. Research on the interrelationship between language and thought and language and class is firmly embedded in educational research (Vygotsky1986; Piaget 1959; Bernstein 1961): space demands that we accept and assume these connections.

Summary

As a summary for this chapter it seems apposite to construct a composite metaphor to represent the findings. The learning experience in college was active, where doors were opened and ladders were climbed, rung by rung. This activity was like a road or river journey; there was a fluidity in the process and a connection between the students and the lecturers whose job was to steer and guide them towards their destination, fitting the pieces together.

How did the contributor, the collective and the activity enmesh to provide better learning? Did discussion skills have an effect on discourse in general? Did the nature of discussion nurture behaviour which began to see learning as something that happened in an interactive collective where you had to contribute to gain something? Does discussion effect more than an exchange of ideas: does it create a thinking that enables group dynamics to create the conditions of learning for themselves? These questions about discourse emanated from the interviews (see Chapter 5, question 6).

The answer to all these questions was yes, to a degree. One of the primary outcomes of discussion groups using shared referents is cohesion. This activity creates a sense of belonging which comes from seeing learning as both shared and sharing. One of the tasks of the research was to test Bruner's ideas that learning is communal (see Chapter 3 on methodology). There was consensus that it was (see Chapter 5) and the effects of this communality meant that people shared the burden of the work but that this was easier because there was a sense of *we were all in the same boat, travelling down the same road" (Susan and Aileen).* This sense of belonging is critical in terms of retention:

Any student, of whatever age, who feels isolated, lonely and out of place and who does not develop a sense of 'belonging' to the learning community is at risk of leaving a course in the early stages. (McGivney 1996: 112)

CHAPTER 7

LEARNER IDENTITY

One of the main issues that emanated from the interviews was the students' perception of their ability to learn. This chapter sets out to examine the nature of learner identity and to understand its origins and components. The data from the questionnaires and interviews will be used to see how the students' disposition to learning changed, and what factors were involved in making this change. As discussed in Chapter 5, the question designed to elicit this information, *What does being a student mean to your definition of yourself?* was not as useful as other questions. It could be said that all the interview questions were, in some way, concerned with their beliefs about themselves as learners. Many referred to their identity in the question on what made them think they could succeed. This is an argument for analysing the interviews holistically rather than by specific questions. One case study will be used to illustrate how the students related the process of change to their self-definition.

Learner identity

What elements are involved in defining ourselves as learners? Our learner identity is how we see ourselves (and are seen by others) as learners. A strong learner identity tends to mean that there is a positive attitude to our ability to understand and learn. It is the way we process knowledge, behave in learning contexts and the way we respond intellectually, emotionally and sometimes, physically, to learning. Weil (1986: 223) describes learner identity as

> the conditions under which they experience learning as 'facilitating' or 'inhibiting', 'constructive' or 'destructive'. Learner identity suggests the emergence or affirmation of values and beliefs about 'learning', 'schooling', and 'knowledge'.

Sometimes the terms *learner identity* and *disposition to learn* are used interchangeably in the educational literature (see literature review for Gorard and Rees 2002; Gallagher et al 2000). It seems likely that if you think of your ability to learn as poor, it probably

makes you less disposed to learn. However, in this study, it seems that these two concepts are different. Most of my students had poor learner identities when they came to college. However, few if any, of them, especially not the adult returners, had poor dispositions to learn. Most of them were open to learning. It seemed that they associated their learner identity with qualifications gained (or not) from school. Their disposition to learn was a less located identity and their receptiveness to learning was less to do with school and more to do with what made them learning adults. It would seem that, although their learner identity was negative and they were, in general, self-deprecating about their ability, this did not affect their willingness to learn. Perhaps they gained an understanding that ability can be developed (Dweck 2000). Perhaps they understood, through life experience, that academic qualifications are not the only determinants of intelligence and that learning isn't restricted to school.

It was important for this study to make a distinction between the two terms, learner identity and disposition to learn. When Weil defines learner identity as beliefs about learning and how it applies to them she makes no evaluative comments on these beliefs. Disposition to learn implies an attitude towards ability and learning; how well you receive that learning, perhaps a "learning readiness"; what Cross (1981: 127) calls "the teachable moment".

In some of the interviews, the students told their story of how school and work affected their learner identities. A brief examination of the issues surrounding the process of how we determine our learner identity would be useful before we go on to the main concern which is how students change in their disposition to learning. Trajectories are not necessarily deterministic although there are indicators identified by the Gorard and Rees study (2002) that for some, these learning trajectories are determined by 16. However, my study shows as do others (Gallagher et al 2000; Chappell at al 2003), that trajectories can be redirected and restructured given the circumstances of external support, self-determination and supportive personal circumstances.

The learner identity is made up of the social, emotional and intellectual dimensions of learning. Many learner identities are formed in school and depending on whether school was enjoyable and successful then the student may have a positive image of him/herself as a learner and want to engage in more. However, positive learner identity is not just a

simple matter of success at school (Rees et al 1997). It has to do with the type of schooling received, where and when. The participants in my study who had no Highers could be seen as "school failures". By this is meant they gained no formal qualifications beyond 16. It is worth repeating here that the primary reason for the initial research categories of Highers and Non-Highers came from the students themselves. They had defined themselves as "*having no Highers*". Many of them found school boring and had unhappy memories of their time there. Yet their learner identity must have been strong enough to overcome this negative school experience to undertake a course of training. How had this come about?

Well, the obvious answer is that not all learning experience is gained from school. Some of the respondents found that being mothers and workers contributed to their feelings about themselves as positive learners. The sub-sample of students without Highers cited life experience as giving them the confidence to think they could succeed at college. Informal learning occurred in the workplace: they compared their performance at work with others and made positive comparisons. In some cases where the students were learning assistants in classrooms, they compared themselves to qualified teachers so they had a standard which was accepted as a legitimate indicator of their own expertise in the classroom. One student said she looked at teachers and said, "*I can do as well as that*" (Davina). Where students had jobs which were not in the education sector, they looked at their performance in terms of efficiency, ability to take on responsibility and to implement systems. One student worked in retail and made comparisons with her co-workers and also with the level of the demands of the job and said that she knew she was capable of more (Lynn). Another student ran a post office and learned from that that she was "*good with people*" and wanted to use these skills more (Dorothy). Weil's study (1986) of non-traditional learners studying for a BA in higher education confirms my findings: she found that the origins of the students' learner identities lay outside the formal education system. For the undergraduates in the 1986 study, many of whom had few or no previous qualifications, learning was linked to work and life experience, not the school classroom.

The school leavers with no Highers who had come to college with less experience in the working world, used their final year work placement at school (and later from college workplace practice) as a guide to their learning capacity. The evaluation of their work

practice and the problem solving that went on in this situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) served as useful indicators of their learning ability. They gained in self-esteem and confidence when they represented their learning at work within the college classroom context. Those school leavers who came with some (or one) Highers were more confident of their learning ability by having higher qualifications, but, at times, they were equally lacking in confidence when issues of life experience arose in discussion. Most students arrived with misgivings, and even those who had "proved themselves" in the workplace, needed assurance that their learning ability was linked to their life experience. Part of this study is concerned with the links between the type of thinking and learning done in "ordinary" adult life and how that fosters success in the classroom.

Examining the learning events cited by the students interviewed helps us gain an understanding of what contributed to their learner identities. The comments could be categorised into four main groups. They are in no particular order except that, since a study described below ranked attitude from home as the most significant factor, I have followed its lead.

1.   parental attitudes and support
2.   teacher attitudes and support
3.   lacking ability/interest in subjects
4.   being part of a sub-culture which rejected school

It may be that, in some cases, all four factors worked together in some way, making it difficult to say what the initial cause or most significant factor was in the lives of my interviewees.

Gorard & Rees' (2002) study found that parental attitudes and support were the most critical in determining learner identities, having an impact that stretched back three generations. Despite negative experience at school, the undergraduates in Gorard and Rees' study, once a positive identity had been re-established in the more formal setting, could see themselves as being learning-prone. These findings concur with mine. Once students have been given a sense of legitimacy about the learning they have done, whether in the home or workplace, and once it is seen to be regarded as worthwhile, then it appears that this can be transferred to more formal contexts.

In some cases the interviewees saw teacher attitude and support as separate: "attitude" was encouragment and being supportive of them as pupils/students but "support" was seen as practical help with learning. Many students saw "attitude and support" as a holistic combination; they saw the teacher as supportive of them and that this was integral to the way they taught: "*The subject was the teacher*" (Roslyn C.).

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000), in their study on transforming learning cultures, link intervention through teaching to changing motivation and affecting self-esteem. Their study found that learning identities changed and the students adapted to new learning requirements: my study endorses this. They tracked 50 students for 3-4 years from their final year in secondary school to further education college in England. They found that the learning careers of their students were not linear but erratic and unpredictable; they were not even a result of reasonable and determined choices. Most of my students did, however, make reasonable decisions and their choice of a vocational area where they had an interest was a counterbalance to the lack of interest they had shown in school subjects. This is not to say that this reasoned decision was not the result of some other erratic and seemingly serendipitous occasions in their learning careers. What is important in comparing these two studies is that, for students with different entry points (conscious career choice versus happenstance), learner identities were changed.

New learning, new identities

The data from the questionnaires threw up some themes for successful learning. Teaching methods, which involved student-centred teaching and learning, encouraging independent thinking and involvement in class discussion were conditions which supported their confidence in learning. Support from staff which included better student-staff relationships, being recognised as an individual and treated as an adult and given more (than school) respect, were all qualities which were conducive to a positive identity. *Subject interest* was cited by 11 Non-Highers: the lack of interest in school subjects compared to the high level of interest in the college course was confirmed in many interviews. Motivation and interest are closely connected and it is probable that the students did not do well in the subjects they had little interest in. The college course was based on a practical skill which was the foundation for further academic learning. Because they were interested in the vocation of working with people with learning difficulties, and thought they had some skill in this area, they had a more positive learner

identity within this subject context. No more than a tentative link can be made in extending this to better learning ability in other subjects as no learning beyond the course and its work placements was discussed in the interviews.

The interviews examined the students' attitudes towards their learning ability on entry and how the college experience transformed these attitudes and ability. It is easier to see this transformation within a chronological narrative of a single case study rather than as multiple answers to an interview question, as these can fragment experience.

Case study: John

John was chosen as a case study for two reasons. He was the only student who progressed from no Standard Grades or Highers to BA, so it would be safe to assume he had a poor learner identity on entry to college and that some change had occurred. He also had the lowest score of any student on the course in the self-esteem questionnaire (Coopersmith 1981) given to all HNSLN students. A debate about the validity of these questionnaires and even about the concept of self-esteem itself is not appropriate here: what is important for the choice of this case-study is that, compared to his peers, John lacked confidence: he had underlined the word *failure* twice in his questionnaire form ("*being automatically classed as a failure...my school experience*"). Since change in self-identity was the central concern, John was the obvious choice since he had made the greatest leap. Although John's self-definition as a learner may have been poor, his disposition to learn was high. John did a first interview like the rest of the group and then, when he agreed to being a case study, he came into college for a second interview. This was unstructured and the interviewer took notes (see Appendix H). John filled in the gaps of the researcher's knowledge and answered the occasional question about learner identity in this lengthy account of his learning career. He spoke at length on learning at work, the public acknowledgement, and the private nature, of learning.

John came to college, aged 39, with "*no qualifications and no transferable skills*" to do the NC because he wanted "*a change in direction*". He had been unemployed for a time and he lacked self confidence. He had had a poor experience of school ("*you didn't know you were smart*"); he had left school "*with nothing*". John's interview read like an awakening of his self-achievement. He addressed the question of how the student identity related to his experience by saying that "*being a student has helped unlock*

something that was always there". He discussed his reading of *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and how reading had become a part of his ongoing learning: "*When you start to read you get inquisitive*". John gained a Higher National Diploma in college and went on to do the final year of a degree programme.

Groups were important in John's learning, both in terms of personal support and intellectual endeavour. He felt more comfortable in a smaller more "*trusting group*". This solidarity within the group also helped him in his degree year (he went to university with two other students from his college course). John used the word "*trust*" twice; this also came up when discussing learning. By asking questions, "*you put yourself out there*"; this meant you were taking risks (difficult to do when you have low self-esteem), but the vulnerability and exposure were reduced if the group was trustworthy. He spoke about the thought "*belonging*" to you and if you don't verbalise it, it's not "*open to ridicule – the idea and you are vulnerable*". He went on to say "*If you don't ask your own questions they'll never be answered*". There is an implication here that the student is responsible for asking the question. There is also a sense of ownership contained in the expression "*your own questions.*"

When he was asked about the quality of teaching at college, he said that as students, they were not "*short changed*"; the teaching made him want to learn and that respect was "*two-way*". Having the public validation of a degree was also important. In answer to my question whether having a degree had given him a voice, he said, "*Yes, I always put BA after my name because I'm proud of having a degree. It's the yoke of celtism.*" In his second interview John explained that "*with recognition, you can throw the yoke off.*" John's comment seems to be making two points about identity and recognition. He says initially, that there may be a need (he equates this with a cultural burden) to have formal recognition through a qualification. When he first came to college he had no qualifications, and he felt that this determined his identity. Like most of the other interviewees, John equated qualifications with "being smart". 10 out of 54 of the Non-Highers had no Standard or O Grades. He came with a friend who had 'O' levels; "*She was smart and I had nothing, so I wasn't.*" His second comment about throwing off the yoke seems to assert that once qualifications as validation of oneself is recognised as a burden, it can be thrown off. It is difficult to live with the self-definition of "unqualified". It is equally unrewarding to see qualifications as the only valid statement

of one's identity. The conflation of recognition of your qualification and yourself as separate is a fine and interesting distinction and is concerned with learner identity.

John came to realise his intellectual ability when he was on the degree course: he "*read something and realised I could understand it. It was like getting on a roller coaster and you didn't want to get off*". (This connection between opening up and movement expressed by John's roller coaster metaphor is common in the interviews.) John spoke about unemployment and the lack of structure that goes with it. When he signed on at college it was "*taking charge again*". He related this control to his work as an advocacy worker: "*In my job I encourage individuals to take charge of their own lives*". He had worked at a dairy for 22 years and although he now realises that he must have been "*picking things up*" on the job it wasn't until he came to do the college placement in an adult day centre that he discovered that he would have to "*change his way of learning because, before that, I worked on my own but at (name of centre) there were more group activities so there were different rules and regulations*". This is not a simple case of John realising that working with milk bottles and work with people is different; he uses the word *learning* not working and it appears that there is a significant acknowledgement of seeing the world differently. What John learned was how to learn and adapt to context. He says that there was an element of college that was like employment. For John, there appears to be a very blurred line between work and learning.

What happens in college to turn round a negative learner identity? Extrapolating some features of John's experience and linking them with comments from the other interviewees will establish a picture of classroom practice. Sometimes the students allowed teachers and others to construct their identities; we are all familiar with the assessment of "school failure". John came to college thinking he wasn't "*smart*" because he didn't have any certificates. Paul Willis' study (1977) is an analysis of how much students took on board, and colluded with, these definitions. Those that arrived at college, having accepted the definition, coming from "*a long history of being stupid,*" (Roslyn) and those who knew that there were other legitimate ways of defining your intelligence took different paths in changing their identity. Roslyn was one of the eight students mentioned previously, who had left school at 16 with no Highers to come to college. Her case study is used in Chapter 8. It is probable that the process towards

changing the disposition to learn would take longer for those who had had little life experience to ameliorate the effects of the failure image. This may have applied to John in that, although he had done several jobs, he had been unemployed just prior to enrolling in college.

Four of the students, all Non-Highers, said that praise and encouragement were given at college but not at school. *"When I was at school you were never given any encouragement"* (Elizabeth, age 36). Some of the students with few qualifications decided to give college "a go", not sure of their success. Most (if not all) came to college thinking that their lack of qualifications indicated something negative about their learning ability. How do these two attitudes relate to motivation and achievement?

Identity and motivation

Carol Dweck's (2000) theories on attitudes and motivation are useful in explaining this connection. When people (findings came from studies from age five to undergraduates) are faced with a difficult task there are two types of responses: one is motivated by the desire to perform while the other by the desire to learn. Translated to my students, these were the "give it a go" and the "cannae do that" types. Although Dweck presents these as types, my experience is that students displayed different attitudes in different circumstances although, at times, (particularly on first entering college) they had a global attitude to their ability where the "can't do" dominated the "give it a go". If you are a mastery orientated person (according to Dweck), when you are faced with a difficult task you become more engaged, often use your own resources and increase the overall effort you put into solving the problem. In my study, this is similar to the way my students approached tasks which had loose boundaries: what they called *"self-directed learning"*.

These behaviour patterns are unrelated to actual ability (Dweck 2000). Dweck links some high performers with the desire to reach goals and perform; learning is secondary. This often results in the brighter person not testing themselves on tasks they are not confident of mastering, for fear of failure. Those students who were mastery oriented performed better because they had a belief in their potential and were not so concerned with "looking smart" and validating their IQ as they were in learning and developing, even if it meant making mistakes.

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At the root of these behaviours is the belief that intelligence is innate, finite and somewhat immutable.

> …the entity view sees ability as a fixed trait, an invariant, frequently innately determined or God-given…(Claxton 1996: 54)

Many of the students in this study came to college with this view (John's comment about not having any 'O' levels sums it up). So the interview question which asked the Non – Highers about what made them think they could succeed was a good indicator of what Dweck category the students came under. This is not to say that every student who said they were willing to "give it a go" carried that thinking with them to all tasks but it may give an indication of their motivation.

Dweck warns against the universal praise ethos which dominates some educational thinking. Children should be praised for effort, not for completing tasks they can do easily. Praise for easily mastered tasks confirms their views that IQ is essentially fixed and doesn't lead them to consider the development of intelligence. The point is to change "can't do" into "give it a go". For the students in my study, one of the primary steps to changing their learner identity was to change the way they thought about their ability to develop. This questioning of the assumptions underlying the view of intelligence (the "entity" view), relates to the way the students came to reassess their label of "school failure", discussed later in this chapter.

Identity beyond school: work and college

Lecturers "*valuing their opinion*" increased students' self-confidence. Lecturers encouraging them to use their life experience to think in ways that confronted "established" truths may have given them the confidence in their own ability to think and problem-solve. It may have given them the courage and insight to re-assess the learning identity they had as a legacy from school. As Lynn says, "*I believed what they (the teachers) told me but life experience taught me that I'm not stupid.*" If learning in the workplace can be seen to have meaning transferable to other situations, then formal (school/university) learning loses its rarified hue and assumes a lesser place in the hierarchy of learning. Many of the day-release students on the HNSLN course say that

when they came to college they began to think about the implications of their practice. Learning for them is not just a confirmation of their daily practice but an affirmation of their learning ability. Good workers make good learners. Doing and then thinking about doing may result in a heavy toll of mistakes, but it is a way to understand principles within a situated context. A common attitude held by the day release students (they came to college from work for one day a week) was that reflection on practice in a tutored classroom setting allowed them the space and support to form frameworks for understanding the theory behind the practice. Learning in college confirmed that what they had been doing intuitively had a substantial theoretical tradition. By bringing their knowledge of practice into the college and using it in a formal context to substantiate theories of learning, they not only see that there are different ways of learning but that application is, in itself, a legitimate way to confirm their disposition to learn.

One of Weil's (1986: 225) interviewees said:

> Re-encountering the system as an adult jarred me into realising what was happening again. Once again, the formal system didn't allow for thinking, curiosity, enthusiasm, reflecting. <u>Nothing to do with my experience as a learner [outside].</u> But it has given me the confidence to express my needs as a learner, and to challenge. I know what I need as a learner. I now know I've only just started. But application is crucial for me. (my underlining)

Although the "system" did not allow for the qualities that the student above showed elsewhere, what she did find was the confidence to challenge the system. My interviewees also expressed this sense of frustration with their initial labels as "stupid" and not worth investing in, because they could see how the formal system and, particularly their experience of schooling, didn't allow them to flourish as learners and that this may not have been their fault. The respondent uses the metaphor "jarred" and says "again" – a realisation that this classroom had all the stultifying aspects of her school context. For the student quoted above, the change has come about through confidence to "express her needs as a learner" and she is able to hold onto her identified best way of learning through application. What this student has arrived at (and we can only assume that the right conditions were provided to allow the student to reach this knowledge) is how she learns. This may sound like a small step in changing learner

identity but I would argue that the process by which students arrive at this stage is one which encourages them to reflect and critically appraise their personal educational history, set this within the context of the work placement and out-of-school life in which they learn, and then to look at these metacognitive elements as an integral part of their learning life. It means that when they say, "This is the way I learn", it is not simply a statement contextualised within a formal education situation, but a statement which constructs their identity in other areas of their life. Roslyn makes this point when she describes the "*next stage*" in her learning career as doing a job well, and this is linked to "*self-belief*". To labour a point, it is essential that the restructuring of your learner identity, upon which this study suggests that educational success depends, becomes a part of how you define yourself.

Student: socio-cultural aspects and psychological application

As previously stated, question five of the interview which was designed to elicit answers on learner identity was less illuminating than looking at the interviews as a whole. The interviewees' thoughts on their learning ability were scattered throughout the text. The answers were that success (passing assessments) was helpful; confidence to learn was encouraged by supportive comments from staff and peers; and some felt that there was always the disposition to learn but that school had not brought that out. For some, the status of student provided an "*ego boost*" (Roddy); for some, support and acknowledgement of their ability and, for some, success in terms of a qualification, were required. My initial thinking had been that once they took on the serious status of being a student, (which, to me, meant learning) they had started to create their new self-definition: this in turn led to more confidence in their intellectual ability and thus made them better and more successful learners. This fits in with Emler's findings (2001) that success affects self-esteem, not the other way round.

Learning has become part of their self-definition. Arguably, it is their redefinition which allows them to see themselves as successful. To go beyond that experiential empirical evidence that is obvious to keen and experienced observers in classroom interaction, further data comes from the students in that they say they have become readers ("*I've read about a dozen books whereas before I never read a book*" Joanne). Some students who had never read texts which might be described as substantial came to see this as a part of their life ("*Now, I'll lift a book to do with psychology, any psychology,*

sociology..." Elaine McN.). Once students take on this serious aspect of self-definition, they often call it "getting the bug", and see it as a way of defining their lifelong learning status. John described how, once he started learning, it was like "*being on a roller-coaster*".

The learner identity question in the interview however, was one which made them uncharacteristically hesitant. Many of them saw it as a social definition at first. The word "student" carried with it a class profile; it also assumed youth and a certain insouciant attitude to life. However, on further questioning and prompting, they were able to take on board the intellectual qualities of being a student and reflect that they "*feel intelligent*" (Emma). They linked being a student with confidence: "*The first year I read the lot whereas this year I feel more like a student – I feel, no I know, I am more intelligent this year than I was last year*" (Lynn). This comment requires some explanation. What Lynn meant was that when she first came to college she couldn't discriminate what was useful so she read "*the lot*" but now that she is "*more intelligent*", she can discriminate, so this made her feel like a student. This subtle comment on making strategic decisions about what is required for learning is dealt with in detail through the ideas of Claxton (1996) and Entwistle (1996) in Chapter 8.

For many, the definition of student meant making an attempt at learning – they were given a challenge which they accepted: others needed the achievement of passing the first year to take on board the definition of student. After passing the first year of the HND course, Margaret M. said, "*Now I'm a student.*" For some, being a student meant "*bettering yourself*" (Carrie-Anne) and bettering your family's life chances. Many of the mothers made some reference to "others"; either to give their children more choice in life (Emma) or doing it "*for myself, not for the children,*" (Ann). For John it was about "*taking charge*" and putting some "*structure*" back in his life.

Many of the students made socio-cultural statements which recognized social stratification and the relationship between class experiences, educational qualifications and social mobility. They understood that a degree is more than a qualification. Here again, Roslyn C. provides some apt comments on the relationship between achievement and self-definition. "*Next stage is to say I've got a job and I do it well. You can't have one without the other. It's more of a self-belief.*" Eight students made some comment

similar to "*it raised my opinion of myself*" (Liz). Some translated the rise in self-confidence to intellectual change rather than social: "*I feel intelligent,*"(Emma). The class and intelligence factors overlapped. Having an HN qualification or a degree meant you were intelligent; they didn't use the word "educated". Perhaps the word educated had class links that these students didn't feel comfortable with. This intelligence was linked to confidence.

Another group linked the student identity to learning more but some considered this additional learning as part of their job. These were more mature students who often rejected the "student" part of the identity and could have possibly substituted "worker". John had a similar attitude to learning and work. After discussing this in the interview where they were asked to consider a student as someone who learns, they then described the experience of learning as an important part of life: "*Being a student has helped unlock something that was always there*" (John). This is the same student who said his friend had 'O' levels so "*she was smart and he didn't, so he wasn't*". While this comment was meant ironically, there was still a residue of this feeling of inadequacy, even in someone who had gained a degree, having come to college with no qualifications. His own validation of his intelligence was not enough. Perhaps he needed the social legitimation of qualifications, even while regarding this need as a "*yoke*".

Using Chappell's (2003: 47) definition of the identity construction process, we can see how the interviewees' answers in my study can be classified as either "reflexive" (my definition of myself arrived at through rational processes) or as "relational narrative" (the construction of my identity through stories which are culturally determined) or sometimes both. In answering the question on how they defined themselves as a student some of my interviewees gave answers that appeared to be individual constructions ("me" the student according to my own personal egocentric construct) and some defined student as a socio-cultural construct and discussed their match with that picture.

Some interviewees assigned a social and class definition to themselves. This alternative identity could be said to affect their learner identity in ways similar to that of school failure. Students were conscious of social stratification and how they fit into these layers: this was often expressed as "*People like me don't go to university*" – "*Girls like me worked in the factory*" – *Our group was treated like this* (dismissive wave of hand)

what do they know? <u>They</u> won't know how to do it. I was put by the radiator" (Roslyn C.). These definitions, which were regarded from a phlegmatic distance, were partially ironic but with an awareness of the disabling effects. At times it seemed as if they rejected the image while hanging on to the disabling effects. Roslyn C., in her email confirming her case-study details, says, *"The main thing about College and University was that every year that went by, surprised me that I was still there and that no-one had figured out yet that I'm not clever!"* This was the same student who was put by the radiator in school, in order to "improve her concentration". (This was Roslyn's ironic take on her teacher's behaviour management technique.) Perhaps the radiator had done more damage than she thought. What prevails for this student is a definition that no amount of academic success seems to countermand. What is more interesting is that this does not prevent her from further study: my most recent contact with Roslyn C. was a reference request for a post-graduate course.

Identity and discourse

> We live in a circulating world of discourses and we are required to interpret this discursive world. Yet discourses often remain unexamined in terms of the work that they perform in the construction of our identities. (Chappell et al. 2003: 43)

What are the elements that affect the change in the disposition to learn? How learning is transmitted and the way the answer is received is often dependent on the lecturer's use of language. Gallagher's study (2000: 43) showed the importance of the language used by the tutors in supporting students who had "fragile" identities: "Getting the language, presentation and style right is crucial" (2000: 65). Using language to enhance understanding, speaking with the students rather than at them, and role-modelling thinking through the use of discourse acts as a linguistic model for the students. It seems important that the language used in areas where the content is difficult to understand, should be clear and free of academic affectations. On the other hand, students come to college to have the "*avenues*" to thinking "*opened up*" (Patricia) and one way of doing this is to increase their linguistic precision. Language defines us in multiple ways. For these students, to use a new discourse carried with it a set of tensions which meant a re-definition of themselves as learners, and therefore, as people.

During the course the students' use of certain forms of language to describe their learning identity, and the way they told their stories, changed. Their language became more reflective, their words and phrasing more tentative and less dogmatic. Pauline commented in her interview on how exchanging views and ideas with others made her think differently, express herself in less black-and-white terms and, eventually, change as a person. Evidence of this change in others comes from the interviews but it was also obvious to the researcher/teacher during the course. It was not simply a matter of adopting new vocabulary: it was an adoption of a new register.

The stories the students tell of their learning lives appear individual but they are also culturally determined. "*It stopped me from being an old fuddy-duddy*" (Margaret) is one of my favourites because it sees learning not only as a youthful activity but also as an energetic activity. The over-50s sometimes think that they are too old to learn, and yet for this student learning gave her a new lease on life. The same is also true of the language they chose to narrate their story. It could be said that many students, over the two to three years they spent at college "rewrote" their stories by learning how to reflect on their experience. Part of this rewriting was changing the way they spoke about themselves. They had an understanding of "acceptable identities" (Chappell et al 2003: 54) and the language which represented these identities.

What identities were available to these students?

> When we tell stories about our lives we construct these within larger narratives or discourses that provide criteria for evaluating the actions, for example, the good mother, the serious student or the enterprising worker…seeing how their identities are constructed through multiple, changing and often contradictory discourses of work, education and domestic life. (Clarke 2002: 73)

The students on this course chose to weave in and out of these identities. They used their knowledge from different areas of their lives and came to understand that all of them contributed to their learning identity.

Richards (2006: 61) describes three types of discourse identity which affect group dynamics. There is discourse identity (the talker), the situated identity (student) and the

transportable identity (mother of disabled child, support assistant in schools, advocacy worker). The transportable identity is the one to use to generate discussion. The "student talker" has an authenticity when the transportable identity as mother, worker etc. speaks. It contextualises knowledge, particularly if the experiential perspective is made explicit. It also gives students an opportunity to use previous experience, enter the debate on their own terms and see themselves as fulfilling many roles. It enables them to have an overview of their social and cultural roles which is a step towards understanding how their world functions. It represents the self as citizen.

Language is used in determining a set of social and cultural "facts" about a person. This discursive determination is an interesting idea and certainly evident in the classroom in further education and in the higher education interface, but, like all determinisms, does not help to open up avenues for interpretation. Its utility is limited. It is more useful to view discourse and its role in identity formation as having both constraining and enabling qualities. Individuals exist in multiple competing discourses.

> …they clash, compete and interact with each other, opening up the possibility of the emergence of new understandings, knowledges, interpretations and points of resistance in the construction of selfhood. (Chappell et al. 2003: 43)

The students had a way of talking about workplace practice, a way of discussing their personal frustrations and victories and a way of contributing in language discussion groups, all of which required adjustments to their ways of speaking as, for example, mothers. In addition to this linguistic versatility, they learned more formal, oratorical skills in making presentations in class. Over the two years of the HNSLN course, students begin to talk about themselves using different terms, tones and presentation. It's as if they began writing in pencil and finished in bold ink. As the interviews indicate, they gained confidence: one lecturer commented on a former student, "*She even talks like a degree student*" (Lori).

Identity as narrative
Self-definition through the telling of stories is a way of representing yourself to others. Depending on the nature of the course the students are taking, this representation occurs at different levels and to different degrees. On this HN course there was a lot of

storytelling. Making sense of themselves as learners gave them an insight into understanding the learning patterns and pathways of others. By telling stories they learned to define themselves in their many roles. Apart from their learner role in college and at work placement, they were also a member of a learning community on both sites. There was a dimension of being an individual and a group member in their stories; this dimension was also demonstrated in their interviews.

The students came to define themselves through these stories, told on a daily basis. The point was that they had to be guided towards the importance of the self-definition through narrative; that is, to be convinced that they had a story to tell and know that it was being listened to. It is the tacit understanding within the class culture of knowing who speaks, when, and in what position of authority (Coffield 2004). The acknowledgement of this authority (for example, as a worker in a particular institutional setting) was made explicit by the tutor and recognition of this contributed to their change in learner identity. Data from the second question in the questionnaire confirmed that being encouraged to give their opinions and "being recognised" as an individual were important aspects in the difference between school and college: *"You are treated with more respect and encouraged more to think for yourself and offer your opinions"* (Roslyn W.). There were 21 remarks on this theme. John also made comments on independent thinking and "*two-way*" respect.

The interview was constructed so that the time line (or plot of the narrative) did not follow chronology: school experience, then work, then college (with work being omitted for the school leavers). Since the learning experience at college was the main focus, even though it was presented vis-à-vis school and work and life experience, the narrative started at that point and wove in and out of the past, attempting to give a picture which had forces acting in a non-linear fashion. Just as we live in a "circulating world of discourses" (Chappell et al. 2003: 43), so we live in a circulating world of events where old experiences accommodate new ones which are in turn shaped by old ones. Hunter (1991) expresses this when she says stories contain, past and present, cause and consequence. Chronological recording of events can sometimes mislead: just because an event follows another doesn't indicate causality. If events were causal, I wanted the students to indicate that themselves.

There appeared to be three narratives or profiles operating within the students' stories. There was the initial school failure profile; then there was their own assessment which told them that the school story was not the whole one. This insight may have been what led them to college thinking they could make a go of their second chance. The third profile was the one they told of their college experience where they became effective learners. This final overlay was still susceptible to the original, partially imposed, school failure narrative: many of the students were still incredulous that they had "made it" or wondered why no-one had found them out yet. Roslyn C.'s comments in a previous section are an example of this. John's story was also full of conflicting statements about his self-definition as a learner.

How do these three self-definitions – the initial one, the more reflective one and the newly constructed one at college – help us to understand their learner identity? While concepts like identity are rarely directly knowable, it could be safe to say that for these students the three narratives acted as insights into the social and emotional aspects of learning. They also used their knowledge of identity in their work with others with learning disabilities to overcome entrenched attitudes to learning. It is perhaps these insights that acted as catalysts in their career choice of supporting people with difficulties/disabilities, many of whom would have been classed as "school failures". To compound the complexity there was another narrative taking place: this could be termed the metanarrative. It was the researcher's story of these students' stories which constitutes this study.

Identity and pedagogies

Learner identity is predicated, in part, on pedagogical traditions. These traditions (Boud in Chappell 2003:12) assume a certain type of learner. They present a student as static and therefore do not fit into the research issue of how students change. However, it is useful to examine them in the light of how the learner identity fits into a set of teaching discourses which are predominant in further education. Of the four traditions that Boud discusses, *self-directed, learner-centred, critical pedagogy* and *the learning machine*, all form part of the FE ideology to differing degrees. The first two identities are what educators strive towards, they are part of the ideology and the rhetoric of prospectuses and course descriptors. The third, critical pedagogy, resides within a more radical tradition of education for social change which, considering the college population (many

students with minimal qualifications) should be one of the aims of the further education college. The fourth, the learning machine, may be what many vocationally driven courses actually manage to achieve.

The purpose of this section is to relate these premises to learner identity. How do pedagogies help to create/constrain student identities? What happens in college to alter these self-perceptions? There is still an assumption of what makes an academic success and how intervention in the form of certain teaching approaches can change the way we learn.

It is not clear whether these traditions assume that students, by nature, respond to them or that, through ways of teaching, they develop into these types of learner. It would seem that these pedagogies rely on a student's natural disposition towards them (hence the emphasis on learning styles) but that they also try to shape these student identities at the same time, perhaps because a style of teaching suits either the teacher or the subject. Some of the students in this study who came to college described themselves as self-directed, and some became self-directed; this implies that the self is able to reflect on and learn from experience. Some teaching approaches are learner-centred and assume the learner has an "authentic self" and that learning for them is an integrated event, both cognitive and affective, resulting in some kind of learning behaviour. Learner-centredness is central to the teaching approaches discussed in Chapter 8.

Self-directed learning and identity: taking control

Teaching approaches, those that "facilitate" learning and encourage self-directed learning, embrace a different image of the successful learner. The data from the interviews with the students with Highers shed some light on this. A connection was made between choice and responsibility: many students echoed Scott's equation: "*Choice is responsibility.*" Those with no Highers translated the choice into the first step into college. They chose to come to college and they chose the subject. This was the first step towards self-direction. "Participation starts with self-evaluation" (Cross 1981: 126). In pedagogical terms, this choice is more than a social commitment: choice and decision-making involves higher order thinking skills. Those students with Highers maintained that when the parameters were not drawn for them (as they had been in school), they made their own. Deciding what areas to research and in what depth were,

essentially, cognitive choices. Some students estimated that they probably went farther along the path in investigating than if they had been given specific boundaries. They pursued areas of interest at a deeper level. Derek described it as "*more scope*".

> In many situations nothing is more likely to preclude good thinking than defining terms at the start. For another thing certain kinds of learning seem to take place only if people remove their shoulders from the harness of a goal for a while and engage in non-instrumental behaviour. Most wise teachers have a sense of paradoxes involved in learning; how the hardest things are often learned only when the students stop trying or stop practising. (Elbow 1979: 132)

"Non-instrumental" behaviour may be what the students are talking about when they say that if they are allowed to follow their own paths and not the prescribed ones of educational tramlines, they may produce better work. In any case, it will be theirs and this seemed to be a quality that many students invested in.

For one student the choice to engage in education represented something deeper than it being just non-compulsory. Having the autonomy to decide what and when you wanted to learn was directly related to the *way* she was learning. It is worth quoting Ruth D.'s answer in full. The difference between school and college is "*…choice. I wanted to be there. At school you had to be there. It was about how much you wanted to put into it. It was open…more discussion, more conversational. It was the students' own ideas.* [The tutor] *would pull ideas out of your head…not just what you've got to do. It was about what I wanted to get out of it. I chose to be there.*"

The circular structure of her comments indicates a completion: she begins with self-determination and she ends with it. In the middle she names techniques and events that contributed to her learning and (presumably) enhanced this autonomy. Perhaps the maintenance of control is essential in a learning environment. Here Ruth is very much in control; she made the choice to come to college; she chose how engaged she would be in the process; she and her fellow students had the ideas. All the tutor had to do was "*pull*" them out of their heads. She makes a distinction between doing (here she meant assessment and fulfilling outcomes) and thinking (creating and using ideas). This choice indicates a level of motivation and it also illustrates the level of personal commitment

that effective learning requires. It may be that once the student recognises that the origin of learning is seated within the self then this provides the basis for taking responsibility for that learning. If we see it as outside our control, as happening from "*out there*", it may remain a peripheral information-gathering exercise rather than lasting learning.

Where self-directed learning affects learner identity appears to be that it begins, for these FE students, in the choice to resume education. Failure in school is damaging enough: to put yourself deliberately in the path of failure by returning to a place of education would seem foolhardy. It continues in class with the choice of how and what to study. This sounds as if it is another way of saying that their confidence in their learning being successful has increased; it has, but it is more than that. It is an understanding that the sense of self as learner can be cognitively constructed and while it resides in the socio-emotional aspects of our behaviour, it is the mechanics of the thinking that form the engine for that behaviour.

Critical pedagogy and the learning machine

"Critical pedagogy" (Boud in Chappell 2003) does not sit too well within the conservative ethos of FE colleges, because it sees the student as someone distorted by ideology, who has been deprived of decision making faculties and is a product of "the system". It is not that FE colleges would deny the disabling effects of being labelled a failure or that our students are deeply affected by that label when they arrive at college, but it is not a tradition that contains a cost-effective solution. If we see students as requiring to be liberated by Freirian influenced instruction, through a process of social change, it may require more than our limited resources will allow. The students' comments in their interviews on how the college course changed their way of thinking and particularly their way of thinking about learning by questioning "established truths", confirms that critical pedagogy was an element of the instruction on this course. However, this critical thinking approach does unseat established lines of authority and can have an unsettling effect on students' attitudes. Once they gain confidence, it would seem that social change is something they can undertake; however, the lecturer has to be careful of self-esteem and intrusion.

The fact that some of my students began to think of themselves as readers, (John mentioned getting "inquisitive" through reading *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*) and

appeared to change in the way they examined everyday problems, taking on board more than one perspective, and were able to participate in a network which furthered their career, are all examples of this kind of change. Furthermore, the HNSLN course lent itself to critical pedagogy because of its subject base. Theories of learning disability and social inclusion question traditional methods and, because it concerns people who are on the margins of society, social change was an implicit and explicit central concern. It may not be so easy to weave this into more practical areas of FE study (although colleagues in the construction department spoke of students who learned different forms of discourse and protocol when seeking references for jobs. This is a practical outcome of critical pedagogy.)

The final learner identity, "the learning machine" (Boud in Chappell 2003), assumes that students are there to absorb and be "produced" as on a conveyor belt and, while the college rhetoric denies it, this student as product is frequently a reality in skill-based instruction. For many adult returners, this way of teaching may remind them of their school days. It may also be a system into which school leavers can slip comfortably into. Examining the interviewees' comments, this is not the type of learning they valued and, although some commented on how difficult the transition from learning machine to self-directed learner was, there was complete consensus that the latter was the more effective way to learn. It was also a preferred definition. Comments on working being your "own", not regurgitated from handouts, knowledge coming from discussion and others rather than out of textbooks, all attest to the students' investment in a learner profile which was more assertive and independent than a "learning machine".

All pedagogies assume that learners can change by virtue that they can learn. Students often do not share this assumption. Before they can change a poor learner identity, they need to learn that they *can* learn, that their intelligence can be developed through different ways of using their experiences in a reflective and critical way. Just because they are in FE, they are not limited to skills-based training. Dweck's (2000) theories, discussed earlier in this chapter, have relevance here. Interest in learning "*more*" (Ruth) and attitudes which are willing to "*give it a go*" have more potential than raw intelligence.

Two examples will serve to illustrate how methods can be used in developing learning. One method of intervention that is current is the recognition of learning styles and teaching to that preferred style. It is an accommodating approach rather than an additional approach. Some FE colleges use one of the many on-line learning styles questionnaires so that students can determine their preferred learning style. This process may be useful in that they learn about their optimal learning strategies. Raising student awareness of metacognitive strategies may increase their knowledge about how best to study. This may be the first step to a change in learner identity. This evaluative step may be the first stage in the learner giving serious consideration to "being a student". To use these results as a basis for pedagogical accommodation may not be the best approach for adaptability. To increase learning skills and a more positive learner identity, rather than accommodating students' learning styles, teachers could teach them new learning styles so they become more flexible learners. This is to avoid the preferred learning style becoming a learning difficulty when they come to work in the outside world as the workplace is less accommodating to individual learning preferences.

Another current teaching approach is experiential learning, particularly in further education, through the context of work. It could be argued that this is more an explanation of the context than a pedagogical approach, and there is some vagueness as to its nature. However, its prevalence in FE and adult learning theories requires its examination here. Moon (2004) lists a dozen definitions of experiential learning. Some describe it as a process which reflects on an experience and for some it is "unstructured, individualized" and "unconsciously acquired" (Noble in Moon 2004: 109). It seems as if all 12 definitions have contradictory elements. In the context of this study experiential learning will mean an experience that you have in college and work placement rather than a process. Reflection and critical analysis of that experience will be discussed as critical thinking in Chapter 8.

Since all people experience events differently there can be no safe way of categorising what happens with experiential learning. It is safe to say that the college experience offers opportunities by which learning can take place by doing things outside the traditional classroom set-up. It seems to me that that is about as precise as you can be with the definition of this type of event. Using experience to learn and create more adaptable learners relies on a complex set of knowledge. The college lecturers have to be

familiar with the work setting, they have to know how best to elicit stories from this setting and how to then draw out the universal application of the context-specific story. Nicci's comments on how this was done on this HNSLN course are quoted in the previous chapter. This approach affected their learner identity in that it afforded them another way of looking at how to define intellectual ability through practical application. It perhaps gave them an air of authority and expertise in making their story relevant and hence see themselves as contributors to the knowledge gained by the group. Experiential learning may be constraining in its effect on students' identity when the tutor interprets *for* the students or, for a host of understandable reasons, instructs them on what to do with little reflective understanding (hence the learning machine).

For the students who had no Highers, school education had not acted in their favour, and while many of the students who had been out at work considered themselves to have learned something, they may not have given themselves that label of learner. (John was a classic example of a student who had had many jobs, but who still equated intelligence with school success.) Learning at work and academic learning are considered by some of the students to be different things. Some would not have used learning and work in the same sentence although for the case study, John, and for many of the day-release students, they were one and the same thing. For all of the students (including those with Highers) the appeal of the course was its practical content. They were out at work placement for two days each week from September until June. Most of them associated learning with school success and although the more mature learners understood the value of learning through work, linking it to academic learning was a new idea. In relation to their learner identity they could see themselves as "*smart at work*" (Lynn) but not relate this to intellectual ability. Success at secondary school seemed to determine intellectual ability, and work was about being a competent adult with little reference to being a learner. Although linking practice and theory are some of the underpinning tenets of vocational education, it is not taken as read that linking experiential competence with more formal knowledge occurs in all contexts. Through practical application they came to learn that ways of learning are various and multi-faceted. They also came to learn (surprising for some) that, through cognitive analysis, they could learn in a traditional, academic way from the workplace: *"You learned new ways to gather information. You transferred (it) to your workplace…you had to figure out who to ask,"* (Alison, one of

the first cohort to gain a degree). Research, observation, reflection and critical thinking as well as "thinking on your feet" were all part of work experience.

Using experiences and stories from workplace practice in an explicit way as a teaching/learning tool requires knowledge of the work context and understanding their particular discourse (how they talk about their work and their place in that context). How the students fit into these dynamics two days a week for a year, and what they can learn from it, may be consciously tutored through storytelling, reflection on practice and the application of this new knowledge in reformed practice (reference has been made to Kolb's theory in the Literature Review).

What makes one teaching approach more effective (in terms of reflection, metacognition and confidence) than another? It could be said that some pedagogies embrace distinct types of learner – the academic student – the person who is able to extract and process information and return it in a form which passes exams. This "traditional" portrait of the learner fits in with many of the narratives of the students in this study who did not conform to this image, and who thought (like John) that because they did not, they were "stupid". What happened at college was a partial re-assessment of this definition – partial, because, even though some gained a degree, there remained a surprise at having done so.

Changing the disposition to learn is the unwritten task of the FE college: its hidden mission statement. By acknowledging and teaching the many ways and contexts in which learning can take place, the further education student can change her or his learner identity.

Learning relationships

Relationships with staff, with peers, friends, family and work colleagues (both in work placement and in their own jobs which supplemented their income) contributed to their changing sense of themselves. The primary component of these relationships was support. (John sought support structures within each peer group, from NC to degree level.) These took on different characteristics, depending on the source. In some cases it was a family member or close friend bolstering up "fragile" (Gallagher 2000: 43) learner identities to keep them on the course through the initial phases of uncertainty. Support

from staff was given by 65% of those with no Highers as the main contributor to their success. This support was seen to be "*always an open door*" (Margaret), giving useful feedback, "*not short-changing, two-way respect*" (John), having "*faith that they could do it*" (Elaine I.). Gallagher et al. (2000: 34) found that when teaching staff took " a personal interest in the general well-being of students" showing a consideration of their personal circumstances, this type of relationship was "key to students developing a stronger learner identity". Support from peers was seen to be exchanging skills, swapping ideas, legitimating similar responses and accepting dissimilar ones, as material for thought; it was providing practical advice and reassurance at 2 a.m. the night before an essay was due.

Within the communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) learning relationships are seen as central. Supervisors and colleagues in the workplace were seen as important in bringing them within the nexus of the profession and giving them a status (albeit peripheral) even though, as students, they were inexperienced and could be seen as marginal to the work situation. Constant feedback, monitoring, appraisal and referral to their practice (observed by college tutor on visits) all contributed to the sense of belonging to a professional group and network.

The college group could also be seen as a community of practice where learning relationships were forged. Lave and Wenger (2002: 115) define communities of practice as those in which members are mutually engaged in a joint enterprise, demonstrating similar behaviour,

> where members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity and hold varied viewpoints…it implies participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities.

It has been demonstrated that the classroom was a "community of practice" and there is a relationship between a culture of flexibility and negotiation whereby the students can approach the lecturer to determine ways of effective learning. All those open doors indicated a degree of reciprocity. In *Women, Education and Training,* McGivney (1993: 61) says:

According to people experienced in teaching women at the *threshold* stage, courses need to be both structured and sufficiently flexible to incorporate elements arising from experience, discussion and negotiation. Tutors working at this level stress that although forward planning is essential, some negotiation of content and methods is an important part of the learning process and hastens the building of self-esteem. (My italics. Note the metaphor which relates to the door metaphors used by the students.)

The activities through collaborative learning (sharing research, skills, materials, ideas) and discursive exchange were consistent methods of learning on the HNSLN course. They provided other sites for learning partnerships which enabled the students to gain in confidence.

Actors in research: having a voice

I have not read any studies on the effect of the participant being an actor in the research. In my research I was surprised at the level of interest in the findings, the willingness to participate and the response rate. Three (only) said they didn't want to be interviewed because they didn't think they had *"anything worthwhile to say"* although no-one said they weren't worthy! The relationship between the lecturer and her students may have been a factor but I think it was mainly that the process itself was an affirmation of their worth. As academic second-chancers they were being given an opportunity to discuss and advise on learning matters. They were being consulted not as parents, workers or spouses, but as learners. The research defined them as such (the opening statement of the interview stated the intentions) and they were being documented. Their ideas and thoughts became permanent. The effect of the research process on their self-definitions as learners cannot be estimated here. This effect of what appears to be a significant event, often goes undocumented in the literature.

Summary

The students who had no Highers gained a new definition of their ability from work and experience outside school; however, for most, it wasn't until they came to college that they saw themselves as learners. Their confidence in their learning ability increased. Did those students who were already receptive and had not taken on board their school definition have a "learning readiness" which the college experience tapped into?

Probably. Was it a case of a change of self-definition through confidence building? Also, probably. Put simply, the process was this: the students gained knowledge of the way they learned; they used group discussion to exchange experience at placement and investigate ideas through stories. They combined their learning with practical application, they became confident that their own individual learning story was part of the critical process of self-assessment and they learned to trust their thinking. To put it into a learner identity construct: they had taken ownership of their learning, discovering that their disposition to learn could change. This reconstruction was partly due to support from peers and staff seated in a discursive classroom context whereby exchange of ideas occurred within an environment of trust and reciprocity. In conclusion, their disposition to learn was affected by a combination of factors.

The element of learning which had the most effect on changing the learner identity that they brought to college is not learning their preferred style or through work competency (although these make a contribution) but through the "recognition and analysis of assumptions" (Chappell et al. 2003: 16) on which these identities were constructed. They gained knowledge about themselves and learning which supported them in questioning the "performance criteria" on which previous assessments had been based. One of the specific ways they did this was to change their thinking as regards to intelligence. They saw it as having a capacity for development. This motivated them and gave them encouragement.

They were encouraged to tell their own stories of their education and the way they learned; knowledge of learning and pedagogy meant that they could critically reflect on their own learning paths to see that learning in contexts other than school was valid. They could also validate this through applying this understanding in teaching others. The lecturer's interactive role as a language mediator and enricher, as well as facilitator of group discussion, enabled them to use language to think differently; this critical ability was, among other things, applied to their own ability to learn and to seek new definitions of themselves as learners. The next chapter will look at how these learning behaviours are situated in pedagogical traditions.

CHAPTER 8

LEARNING, TEACHING, PEDAGOGY AND MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Teachers are "human events, not a transmission device" (Bruner 1986: 126).

This chapter sets out to link what the students said about successful learning to teaching methods. It examines the three main areas contributing to success indicated in the questionnaire data, **support from staff, teaching methods** and *self-directed learning*. It is connected to the previous two chapters on discourse, discussion and group learning and learner identity in that it shows how, through supportive teaching and learning approaches, these students made a transition. This chapter will argue that what we do in the classroom, the act of teaching and the culture that surrounds it, are deliberate and structured acts. Two of these students, Elaine I. and Roslyn, will be used as case studies to show how the teaching in the classroom led to effective learning.

Put simply, the data told us that support from staff, and to a lesser degree, students, and teaching methods, mainly discussion, led to self-directed learning and also to a positive learner identity. This chapter will examine the common "identities" of college lecturers and show how they contribute to this picture of a successful learner that the students have given us.

A shift in emphasis: the recovery of teaching

The transition from learning to teaching is one of emphasis. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two and the only serious way to evaluate teaching is through learning. Hence, this study started with what the students had to say about their learning. The fear and avoidance of the term "teaching" in FE is rooted partially in the power relationship we try to skirt around in adult learning. These power relations are often resident within didactic modes of teaching, although the "facilitator" can often be just as controlling as the "chalk and talk" teacher. The hesitancy in FE in referring to "teaching" may also be because of the status of the teaching qualification specific to further education. Many college lecturers are not qualified in teaching, but for those who have gained the Teaching Qualification (Further Education) the qualifying brackets may

detract from its status. The further education sector is the only sector that contains teachers qualified at three different levels (primary, secondary and tertiary). Primary and secondary teaching qualifications allow you to teach in further education but the TQ(FE) does not provide the same benefits. Apart from the qualification, the history of recruitment has emphasised the skill-based competence of the vocational area (the "essential" part on the application form whereas the teaching qualification is merely "desirable"). Industrial experience and vocational expertise are sometimes more highly valued than the ability to teach. It may also be a way of accommodating the non-qualified status of some FE lecturers. The downgrading of teaching and the consequent emphasis on vocational skills may be the result of FE colleges excusing the slowness of the costly process of qualifying their staff. It is interesting that training teachers (after all, teaching is a vocational skill) is not seen in the same light as the training of plumbers.

Thus the rhetoric surrounding the concept of teaching has been tentative. Learning is emphasised over teaching. Legitimacy for this is reinforced by educational psychology and educational practice taking the same road, for different reasons, and so it appears we are in step with current educational practice when in fact, we are missing the vital component by not linking how students learn with the way we teach. It is almost as if the learning has become disengaged from the teaching.

In FE, the words used to describe the teaching process often get in the way: words like "facilitator", "deliverer", and "reflective practitioner". They are not specific, give no indication of what is to be done and serve as a form of obfuscation. To understand their meaning and why we need to question their use, these terms will be discussed and then related to the data. None of these words was used by any of the interviewees, despite their knowledge of them. The reasons for this could be that it is not a precise enough term; they may have felt awkward using such professional terms or it may be that this word had no meaning for them in terms of their classroom experience. Buried within these terms are some useful characteristics for teaching. Essentially my argument is for the reclamation of the term teaching *in relation to learning*. Teaching principles that may constitute effective learning for some groups of FE students are outlined in the final chapter.

2 case studies: Elaine I. and Roslyn C.

Elaine I. and Roslyn C. were chosen as case studies because they went from NC to BA and they represented the adult returner and the school leaver, having come to college at ages 25 and 16 respectively. Also, they had different attitudes to ways of learning especially in their use of language. There were similarities in that their central component of success was their relationship with lecturers.

For Roslyn, language was important. She thought carefully about the words she used and was a fluent speaker and writer. Elaine had an oppositional relationship with language and was openly reluctant to change her mode of expression. She maintained a rigidity with register in the classroom and found it difficult to adapt to a different discourse. She had a similarly edgy relationship with success, knowing she "could do it" but not quite believing in her success. For both students (and for John, the first case study) it was the relationship with the tutor and the student group which was the key factor in their success.

Elaine I.

Elaine came to college to do her NC when she was 25. She had one Standard Grade. She wanted to enhance her job prospects and she was the first student who found a job with a relatively (for this area) high status and salary to match after gaining her degree. She felt that the staff support she received at college had lasting effects and it took her through university and into her present job as Home-School Link Worker. Elaine, who came across as a very independent actor and thinker, was not confident in her ability to succeed, had no relationship with the learner identity and had only minimal remarks about the learning experience: *"some classes were very boring...I didn't do so well in them...so boring in some classes you lost the will to live – you lost touch with the subject"*. For Elaine the experience was summed up in the confidence that was put on her, that staff had in her. It was still a surprise to her that she had completed the course. *"Your confidence grows – even though you know you can do it, you still don't believe it till it happens."* The use of you and the impersonal "it happens" taking no individual ownership of the success, echoes a sense of surprise and uncertainty about the success.

Elaine comments on the usefulness of networks in "getting on" (see final chapter for references to social capital) through widening participation: *"Placement is the biggest*

thing – in terms of networking. They helped me to get a good job." Her comments on learning as a communal activity appeared to contradict themselves. At first, she said she saw learning as communal only a *"wee bit...I was in it for myself"*. When asked what she shared with the group, she said, *"I would have shared everything...we studied together".* This sense of sharing will also be examined in the final section on social capital.

Roslyn C.

Roslyn came to college from school. She had 8 Standard Grades and no Highers. She said she had *"ruined her chances in school"*. She remembers being put by the radiator in school so that the teacher could keep an eye on her to prevent her chatting. *"I was put by the radiator in S5 because I spent most of my time chatting in the History class, so the teacher was moving me to keep an eye on me."* She chose her college course based on the work experience at 16 in a special school and meeting a girl with Down's syndrome on a beach – *"the only thing I had to fall back on"*. Like John and Elaine, the learning experience for Roslyn was about the lecturers. *"I could connect with the lecturers"*. She didn't enjoy the passive ones who *"lecture you from here"* with her hands out in front indicating a physical distance, this distance perhaps representing a lack of engagement with both subject and students. For Roslyn, a consistent theme was her personal relationship with the teacher and subject. *"For the kind of learner that I am I saw the person"*. In college her *"stance was valid"*. Like John, validation of her ideas contributed to her learning. Like the others she put great value on her degree: *"It's a good feeling to say I've got a BA. I didn't think I had the intelligence. I came from a long history of being stupid."*

Both students replied by email to my requests for amendments, omissions and extra biographical details (see Appendix E).

Elaine's comments on my construction of her story:

> *Hi Vicki*
>
> *It was nice to hear from you again – as it always is.*
>
> *I think it was very true what you said about me gaining confidence from the staff that put it in me. I think the reason for this was a negative school experience – having had very little secondary education and the constant comments from*

teachers saying that I would amount to nothing – F**K them is what I think now but college was a very scary place for me to be when I started out and at times I thought they might be right, and thank God they weren't. Good luck with your research – I'd love to read what you have written when you've finished if you wouldn't mind.

Roslyn's comments on her case story:

The rest is fine Vicki, I'm not so sure how much you want me to expand on the "extra biographical details" so I'll just say a little.

In primary school, I was a daydreamer with a slight hearing problem – but the teachers didn't know if it was genuine or selective. This slowed me down a lot, plus the fact that the school was open-planned and very noisy.

I really never excelled at anything in primary or secondary, except that I enjoyed poetry and literature. My spelling was always good, but I'm not sure about my grammar! The main thing about College and University was that every year that went by, surprised me that I was still there and that no one had figured out yet that I'm not clever! I realise now that it was hard work that got me through as well as positive learning experience at college and university.

Roslyn's strengths were different from Elaine's in that she had a linguistic development which she recognised and used to work out her ideas. When the class was examining theories of counselling she sat and wrote a poem comparing the three approaches. It was lyrical, showed insight and understanding and had a structure which indicated a greater length of time and effort that she appeared to have put into it. In contrast, Elaine showed little patience with any discussions on discourse and maintained a stance whereby she refused to acknowledge that any change in her language was required with her new educational circumstances. She had a strong sense that her language, the way she spoke and wrote, defined her. Changing her language may have been seen as a betrayal of her working class roots. It is difficult to say whether she changed this at university. It did not seem to prevent her gaining a degree. She exemplifies Entwistle (1996) and Claxton's (1996) view of strategic learners and how to separate need-to-know and want-to-know. Despite this attitude, she was an engaged and thoughtful student and could provide apposite stories from work experience to exemplify theories of learning. She made connections between ideas, practice and social context. She was particularly skilful at

working with children with behavioural difficulties and adept at using reflection-in-action (Schon 1983) to work through solutions.

It is interesting that both women have degrees and yet their doubts about their ability seem to remain. For Elaine and Roslyn the college experience is related to school and people (mainly teachers) and their relationship with them. For Elaine, motivation in college came from the lecturers assuming she was capable of succeeding. They also put a value on what she said and did. For Roslyn, the relationship was central, but it was represented by a style of teaching: more personal, individualised and more receptive to her way of thinking. Despite this more personal relationship, she is still conscious of the authority role of college and university lecturers, seeing them as routing out intellectual imposters. For John, successful learning appears to be about a number of relationships: those at work, fellow students whom he studied with and the teaching staff.

All three case studies, John, Elaine and Roslyn thought the paper validation was important and valued their degrees. All three students had had a negative experience at school and bought similar learning identities to college. In answer to the difference between school and college, Elaine answered, "*Loved college, hated school.*" This is not quoted so much for its insight, but because it is typical of Elaine's terse, reductive, linguistic style.

As a teacher I saw the similarities in these three students. They were the type of student who could think well on their feet, come up with imaginative and original solutions to practical problems and were resourceful. They were not good at retaining lots of facts nor did they absorb theory easily if they couldn't find a suitable application. Some of their writing did not reflect their intelligence and their quick flashes of insight were not easily transferable to assessments. They were good at discussing and engaging with questions and ideas. They were able to accommodate their thinking and could substantiate their opinions if they had some experience to support them. They were not good at the combative style of debate nor did they have the use for information which is commonly paraded as knowledge. Had I taught these pupils in secondary school I would have labelled them as bright, quick, inventive and imaginative. They would have been at the opposite end of the spectrum from "stupid". It is not in the scope of this study to understand how they failed at school. One possible reason is motivation, another is lack

of self-esteem and a third is that they did not have the linear deductive and selective type of thinking that is required for 45 minute exam questions. However, even although the HN programme contained little of this type of assessment, they managed to pass exams at degree level so it was clear that they could master this type of intellectual activity. It would be foolish to draw conclusions based on three case studies, but what we can draw from these stories is that all of them gained some confidence in their ability to learn and that the relationship with staff and other students was key to this.

Teacher and student: multiple identities

The use of the word *identity* in the heading above has a different meaning than in the previous discussion on "learner identity". Here, it serves as a label for behaviour exhibited by the teaching staff and students not necessarily how they expressed their attitudes to their own learning ability. It is less nuanced and layered than the learner identity meaning. The data threw up a set of criteria for what created effective conditions for learning. If these criteria are expressed as student behaviour, they would be: self-directed, responsible for their own learning; critical thinker; reflective practitioner; group member and peer supporter and storyteller. The first three will be discussed. The others have been implicit in the previous two chapters and reappear in the model in the final chapter.

The self-directed student

The self-directed student profile is linked to adult learning theories and its understanding of adults requiring more egalitarian and independent structures than school pupils. It also comes from the tradition of competency based learning which has been dominant in further education colleges, due to the practical nature of its subjects and the system of assessment. Elbow (1979) says that competency based learning can create the self-directed learner if outcomes and goals are presented in a way which shows that there are many ways of reaching these goals. There is a place for using competencies with specific outcomes for the student who lacks confidence or is returning to college because they give the uncertain student the clarity of the end-result; they know where they are going; how they get there can be left up to them once they have gained some confidence. The students in my study said that loose parameters made them self-directed. The gradual acceptance that better learning came from independence was voiced by all of the 25 interviewees with Highers. Many of the students with no Highers agreed with this.

Arguments against competency based learning as limiting and restricting are well-documented (Brookfield 1990; Ashworth and Saxton 1990; Grant 1979) and they can be almost counter-productive in a theory based subject. Although Elbow (1979) says that a goal could be to engage in behaviour that has no goal and Ashworth and Saxton maintain that critical thinking can be a competence, this seems somewhat fanciful in a college where assessments (at least, proof of assessment) have to be rigorously applied and evidence supplied. How exactly would you know when the student had "attained" critical thinking?

Is self-directed learning a description of the way you learn or it is simply an acceptance of choice and responsibility? Many of the students in the interview said it was the choice and decision making that made their knowledge their own (the "appropriation" in Boud and Walker's (2002) terms). Brocket and Hiemstra (1991) maintain that self-direction is both an internal process of choice and also an instructional process which supports that choice-making. It changes the dynamics of the relationship between educator and learner and by allowing the student to determine the learning process it may affect the way they learn. However, studies quoted in this 1991 research were mainly about who and what was done rather than the connection between process and outcomes of attitudinal change. There was no evidence whether this made for better learning. The students in my study maintained that self-direction and independence not only affected their learning, it affected their understanding of self and their ability as workers.

Learner as critical thinker

> Helping learners acquire a critically alert cast of mind – one that is sceptical of claims to final truths or ultimate solutions to problems, is open to alternatives, and acknowledges the contextuality of knowledge – is the quintessential education process. (Brookfield 1990: 21-2)

Critical thinking recognizes and challenges assumptions; it recognizes that context is important. It also carries willingness for change in the exploration of alternatives (Jarvis et al 1998). This willingness for change was expressed by most of the Non-Highers: the course had changed their thinking, their attitudes and their learning capacity. Pauline

attests to this willingness when she says, "*I can be quite one-track but it (communal learning) changes you. I was quite judgemental... I can see things from other perspectives...Look at it differently."* Commenting on the teaching approach using critical reflection through discussion, she said, "*It was pushing you more, making you think of reasons behind it."* This research and critical enquiry can be done by the student alone but it is probable that when it takes place in open-ended discussion format in the classroom where the lecturer asks questions and directs the discourse towards an examination of ideological assumptions, it has a more lasting effect. Specific reference was made to this by several students. Margaret's comments sum up the others': "*the most successful and lasting learning was done as communal activity...there was a high involvement with discussion... we were not made to feel silly if it was not the remark expected...(the lecturer) was steering us to a right, if there is a right, answer*". It is also probable that the students with Highers who said that loose parameters made them more responsible for their own learning, got the confidence to pursue their own lines of inquiry through the dynamics of some class activity. The technical aspects of one way of achieving this will be discussed in Chapter 9.

Ideas and opinions are often expressed as "natural" or "common (just plain) sense" in the classroom; it is the lecturer's role to play devil's advocate and model critical thinking through breaking open these closed positions. The course used in this study (education of people with learning difficulties/disabilities) lends itself to this form of reflective practice based on ideology critique (Brookfield 1998). Questions on what is "normal", how society can construct disability and the education of this sector are based on ideologies of normality and mainstream society. In applying for this course, which questions those tenets of achievement and who is educable, the students may be showing evidence of further questioning of academic certainties.

It may be that if school has been an isolating or poor experience then the thinking that goes into the examination of this experience may contain the rudiments of reflective thinking. Difficult times don't always have negative outcomes. Perhaps one of the differences between those students with Highers and those without is that the level of critical thinking about the education you received is higher if you have left school at 16 with a disinclination to learn in an academic setting but have gained this learning readiness through work. Your thinking may be more honed and open to "unearthing

assumptions" and "submitting them to critical enquiry" (Brookfield 1998: 128) than those who stayed on at school to gain some form of higher qualification. This is not to say that students who stayed on are uncritical, it is just that if you are successful in a system and are benefiting from it, you may not tend to bite the hand that feeds you.

The "school failures" may have reached a conclusion that schooling and all that it had to say on their ability to achieve was not the only way to judge cognitive ability. The fact that they have chosen to override this judgement and apply to college means they are questioning that verdict. The point, for this research, is that these students with no Highers on this HN Supporting Learning Needs course may be more open to this type of teaching and this reflective practice based on ideology critique. By uncovering "hegemonic assumptions" (Brookfield 1998: 130) we begin to question structures and power relationships. We are always looking for "*the reasons behind it*"(Pauline)*.*

Critical thinking should probably underlie all educational activities and is one of the intellectual functions characteristic of adult life. These claims are highly aspirational as it is a difficult and uncomfortable aim to put into practice (Brookfield 1990). Venturing into intellectual no-go areas can be painful and disruptive of accepted bonds of teacher/student relationship and opens up areas of intellectual challenge which the student may be unable to cope with intellectually and emotionally. Brookfield offers a rare emphasis on the emotional content of learning and considers the use of discussion as a way of acknowledging students' ideas giving them "public" credibility which may have an effect on increasing their self-esteem. He appears to take for granted the connection between this and better learning. However, research on the relationship between self-esteem and better learning tends to be inconclusive at best (Emler 2001). Although the data in my study does not indicate any causal connection, the gain in self-confidence and the change in learner identity were indicated by a change in cognition. The interviews show that they began to think differently about the way they learned.

Learner as reflective practitioner

Critical thinking has to be attached to something. It needs to be situated in a practical context and used with examples or it needs to emanate from reflection on these situations. Ideas can also be seen as an example. Cognitive theorists (Bruner 1979;

Piaget 1959) know that learners create their own frameworks for learning and that effective learning requires the learners to organise and set up procedures of their own.

> …learning proceed(s) by working with the familiar and attempting to rearrange it in certain ways so as to make the familiar generate something novel.(Bruner, J.K. 1979: ix)

Learners are:

> …active creators of their knowledge and frameworks of interpretation. Learning is about searching out meaning and imposing structure. (McGuiness 1999: 2)

The students in this study learned to make these structural frameworks using the context of their work placement. They worked from practice to theory. *This is what I do in placement and this is how it connects to my own way of looking at the world.* Students with fragile learner identities can see that they are competent in a practical setting; this competence gives them a confidence to think about their actions in a more generic way. Many of the students with no Highers said they knew, before coming to college, that they could do the practical things. The leap from practitioner to reflective practitioner was supported through classroom activities. Elaine I. was an example of a student who was practically oriented and required a minimal amount of instruction to carry out a successful placement; so successful that her supervisors acted as referees. What she learned at college was how to process knowledge and put it into frameworks which were applicable to her context.

What we, as teachers, do, and who we are, are based on existing pedagogic models. The students' criteria for effective learning need to be linked to the teaching roles. (See Chapter 7 for discussion of Boud's pedagogical traditions.) Linking teaching modes to models can never be as linear and straightforward as it sounds. The clearest way to examine the pedagogies is to examine them through their outcomes in terms of the teachers they make us and the learning that ensues. This task, done properly, would be a thesis on its own. However, there is something to be gained by looking at roles lecturers perform in the college classrooms and restricting those to the data in this study.

These are:

> teacher as facilitator;
>
> teacher as reflective practitioner;
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> teacher as deliverer;
>
> teacher as role model;
>
> teacher as mentor.

The case for teaching and teachers

Teacher as facilitator

The term "facilitator" comes from the adult learning tradition of seeing students as autonomous and knowing; the role of the lecturer is to bring out this knowledge and facilitate the process of making it useful for the student. It questions the traditional power relationship between teacher and taught and is seen as an important dynamic to enhance learning in a classroom of adults. The word appears to give the teacher a technician's role, a paraprofessional, following a set of technical skills.

The European Commission argued in 1998 that teaching had been emphasised over learning and that, to enable learners to respond to a high tech society, they would need to become more self-directed and autonomous (CEC 1998 in Field 2000: 136).

> The teacher's role becomes one of accompaniment, facilitation, mentoring, support and guidance in the service of learners' own efforts to access, use and ultimately create knowledge.

It is perhaps difficult to argue with this definition of the teacher's role, so all encompassing as it is. The term "facilitation" as an accompaniment to the rest of the characteristics is also valid. My data also supports the use of these terms in the above quote and stresses the importance the students put on these roles, particularly support and guidance. However, the students found it difficult to give details on how one goes about the "teaching" part of this. The students' avoidance, to a large part, of how this facilitation happens was evidence that it wasn't just a set of technical skills to master, otherwise bullet points would have been sufficient.

The reading on educational practice gave little enlightenment on what "facilitation" was. It seemed a vague term for some strategies (unspecified) used to support learning. It is a term that crops up in coaching adults, one-day seminars and workshops. Sometimes a facilitator is the interlocutor between presenter and audience – the translator, the bridge, the connector. Perhaps the term can best be defined by what it is not, as it seems to be an avoidance term for teaching, rather than one which has a character of its own. It is not didactic teaching nor is it instructional. It is often used together with experiential learning and is often used in discussion. Making sense of experience requires that the facilitator understands that experience and is able to help the student transcend the experience and learn how to extrapolate general principles so that it can be applied in other contexts. The teaching method we use here is scaffolding (Bruner 1960). The facilitator provides semantic or pragmatic structures to enable the student to build up frameworks for understanding. It requires knowledge of the student, the subject and the experience. This type of knowledge is built up over time and requires training; it is more than a one-day facilitation-type exercise can achieve. However, the teacher's presence is in retreat. The new mode of learning is predicated on the belief that students have the learning within, require the right experience to bring it out and need some "facilitation" on the way. It would seem that, within the context of my course, it is enough that I provide my students with effective placements and then give them the opportunity to discuss their experiences in college. Which is, indeed, what happens. Asking apposite and timely questions, recognising insight or learning thresholds, listening to language use and providing new terms for thinking – all characteristics of scaffolding, are intricate processes – all more complex, as Brookfield (1998) says, than just discussing experience.

Facilitating group activity and discussion is a technique used frequently in FE classrooms. My study showed that group communality, discussion and peer support were important for progress. The teacher's task is to create opportunities for these social learning activities. However, it is more than a facilitator's job to link the activity with the cognitive element (Elbow 1979). These activities must make cognitive sense and be contextually relevant. Equally, social engineering required for constructing networks within the classroom, requires a knowledge of how students learn best and how they can support each other in learning. It is not a job for a social worker or a counsellor or a life coach, although all of these jobs have elements of teaching. It is a teacher's job.

The word, "facilitation" questions the levels of social control and the relationship of power between student and lecturer (Coffield 2004). It seems to serve a social purpose in the classroom; it does not tell you much about the act of teaching.

> Adult education is predicated upon creating free space for reflection and discourse and a reduction of the power difference between educator and learner. (Mezirow 1998: 13)

Wallace (1996: 19) describes this classroom approach:

> The emphasis is on active engagement of learners, the primacy of their learning experience, facilitation (as opposed to transmitting knowledge) and making sense of experience through reflective dialogue between facilitator and learner.

"Active engagement", using experience and "reflective dialogue" are all seen as effective learning strategies but the act of "making sense" is the core of the learning process. Wallace (1996) argues against the use of experiential learning in this loose way because the experience is not tightly tied to the outcome and to the stage of learning. The amorphous experience and subsequent reflection may be of little use unless specified and structured. If education was left solely to the discussion or at worst, the recounting, of students' experiences, no matter how openly connected to the course they are, then some students would be reduced to the limits of their own horizons. He argues for a more controlled, constructed experiential learning which may amount to something else altogether: something that requires more than a facilitator. It requires more than as Roslyn C. says, someone who teaches you "*from here*" (arms outstretched).

Nicci's comments on how learning took place through the exchange of stories and then the lecturer "*tying it altogether*" resonate here. Is it just splitting hairs to say that the roles of facilitator and teacher are different? After all, teachers do facilitate students in making sense of experience through reflection, but it's only the initial part of the process. The students in this data were aware that ownership of ideas assisted retention. Application of principles also aided understanding and retention. The processes involved in ownership, application and the discussion through which this happens are deliberate and planned acts of teaching.

Teacher as reflective practitioner

> Reflective practice explores the gap and the link between beliefs, implicit theories of teaching and learning and actual behaviour. (Jones et al 1997: 11)

The concept of the reflective practitioner seems to be a pervasive concept in education, social care, health care and the other ancillary services that have been subsumed under the title of integrated services. This link of education with other services means that exchange of practices and methods of learning have become more generic. Learning/reflective journals have become valued instruments of (self) assessment. Reflection-in-action (Schon 1983) is expected in these vocational areas. Reflective practice can be used within the classroom to decide when to intervene and when you let the students get on by themselves because the teacher has time to observe and think when the students are getting on with it. The practice is not tenable for those combative episodes we sometimes experience in the classroom zone. Speed of events require action, not reflection-in-action. In reflecting we are forever peering at diminishing versions of ourselves. What effect does this introspection have on the learning process? Is its primary function to make us better teachers or is it concerned with accountability and assessment? Instant and constant examination of practice may be necessary for legitimacy. We may need it to withstand our critics and take on board the new identities that are expected of us. Thinking and reflecting have been connected in the field of education since Dewey (Boud & Walker 2002) and Schon introduced the term, the reflective practitioner, into discourse in the 1980s. Certainly, in my experience in teaching in secondary schools in the 1980s and 1990s, this appeared to be the foundation of sound teaching practice.

Critical reflection is a more precise term for the sort of reflection that is required by the reflective practitioner (Brookfield 1998). Confronting assumed truths and questioning ideas creates dilemmas and in some cases, can be painful; at best, it is uncomfortable. To introduce the concept of self-questioning into a traditional profession like teaching which maintains control partially through the presentation of teacher as knowledge giver and knower (after all, who wants a teacher who knows less than you) is problematic.

Hence, it is not surprising that reflection can become "ritualised" (Boud & Walker 2002: 93) taken out of context and the outcomes ignored. It sees the process as a series of steps and checklists. As teachers we are often bogged down in the practicalities model and we forget the more conceptual one. "What do I do?" may have a higher priority than "How shall I think about what I do?"

As teachers we are required to employ reflection to improve our practice. We also use it with students as a method of learning. The ideal transference in this HNSLN course was when the students modelled themselves on their good teachers and then used this as good practice in their work placement. One student (Therese) commented on using scaffolding when discussing with other students. Reflection on practice is used on courses which have a practical element, usually a work placement. Reflecting on the teaching and learning process was part of the curriculum in the HNSLN course so that the students in this study were more informed than the average student on pedagogical practice. However, reflection on all practice can be appropriate and, if students are to become lifelong learners, reflecting on how they learn is imperative.

Reflection requires an intellectual appraisal of a situation while acknowledging the emotional elements involved in our personal interpretation of the event. Using reflection in the classroom requires an element of mutual trust between students and lecturer and also between the students. Students on this FE course used their experience and revealed their emotional attitudes; as many said, being part of the group and trusting others was a requirement for expressing an opinion. So, reflection is not just a cognitive exercise, but requires a conscious construction of building up a set of structures in the classroom which enable that reflection to carry on openly and freely.

This leads on to hegemonic structures of the classroom and how this model of reflective practice which is often anecdotal, confessional and full of personal risk can cause tension by its very nature, putting pressure on students to disclose information. "Adult Circle Time" can be suffocating and tyrannical. While this model is effective, caution is recommended. It can be more oppressive than a didactic model because, although it assumes a veneer of democratic participation and amount of disclosure, it can lead to judgements about the non-sharing, non-collective students. Some students don't want to participate in discussion, nor do they want to share their experiences. Many of my

students find speaking in front of large (15+) groups intimidating. Some people find collective activity of this type an invasion of privacy. Some students may need to opt out of this method of reflecting and be assured by the lecturer that this self-exclusion will not result in their being labelled as not being a team player. In allowing this choice, we, as lecturers, are questioning the "hegemonic assumptions" (Brookfield 1998: 130) that underlay our practice.

One of the difficulties with this method of reflective practice and, perhaps this is the essence of good teaching, is knowing when the intellectual insight is occurring for the student and how we, as teachers help to develop that. What Bruner refers to as "scaffolding" also requires the recognition of that opportune moment so that moving on to the next level of thinking is appropriate. It is a more immediate version of Cross' s (1981: 127) "teachable moment".

> When and how we move people beyond affirmation (of beliefs) to alternative critical reinterpretations of experience is one of those unresolvable tensions of practice. (Brookfield 1998: 130)

When we begin to question and support students to move beyond their personal stories to representations of a larger context we are asserting that multiple interpretations exist and that the world of the classroom can be a risky place. Trust is required in both the leader and the group on this expedition. In John's case effective participation depended on the levels of trust he invested in different people. The concept of trust brings the teaching model into a different framework; motivation, self-esteem and other psycho-social terms belong to the domain of social theories of learning. However, to maintain that it is an "unresolvable tension of practice" means that what has been defined as the essence of teaching in a previous passage cannot be taught and remains a mystery. It may be neither myth nor mystery, but a case of learning to read signals of readiness and building up a culture of learning consciousness so that students themselves can indicate how and when to "move beyond". Their analysis in my study indicates they were conscious of the process taking place and how they adapted to changing patterns of learning and re-addressing assumed truths.

Reflection does not necessarily lead to learning and improved practice. It can lead to stasis or undermining if it isn't channelled. If it "explores the gap" (Jones et al. 1997: 11) between our ideas and theories, but doesn't provide us with a satisfactory process or answers, it can be just exploration with no discovery. There is also a socio-emotional dimension to reflection done in a classroom. Judging from the interviews in this study, the expression of experiences and the questions involved in the reflection process required trust invested in peers and teacher. Valuing what was said made it important to say it. (A number of interviewees commented on this aspect of how their comments were received). The importance of the group and its reaction to the voicing of individual experiences and what was made of them, required a communal understanding of the relationship between experience, values, situated knowledge and transferable knowledge. This was an understanding that was not implicit: as the students indicated, it was constantly made explicit by the lecturer.

Teachers may avoid reflection because when you encourage this practice, you have to accept the relinquishing of some elements of control.

> Belief that reflection can be <u>easily contained</u> conflicts with all the evidence about learning that we have. (Boud &Walker 2002: 107) my underlining

It also means that students may stray into areas where our knowledge (as "experts") may be limited and this necessitates honesty. Reflection, if used well, can result in the teacher and the students learning together. It may be that the "together" part of this statement is difficult for some teachers and lecturers. In all the case studies there was an understanding of this relationship; that it was *"two-way"*, no-one was *"shortchanged"* (John).

Teacher as deliverer

College parlance for "teach" is often "deliver": there is a reluctance to use the word teaching, although it is often used in conjunction with learning. College lecturers deliver information. Although **lecture content** was seen as important in the questionnaire, no-one mentioned it in the interviews. The reason for this could be that students trust the information part to the lecturers (Connelly and Halliday 2001). Like **assessments** (rated least important in the questionnaire) this is the lecturer's domain. Perhaps this is because

there is a lot of effort put into "information delivery" and so it appears effortless and is thus invisible. However, some of the data indicates that too much information "delivered" in a monotonous way can be distracting and time-wasting (Sandra). The handouts can also appear non-specific and factually based which does not inform understanding nor does it denote application (Diane). They are useful only in providing a content for discussion. In one student's thinking, it was " *less is more*"; a little information and lots of thinking (Margaret). So, while a part of the job is handing over information, it is the handling of information which is the key issue.

Zukacs and Malcolm (http://www.open.ac.uk/lifelong-learning) focus on the relationship between learner and educator and what happens in the classroom. Their criticism of the lifelong learning rhetoric is that it obscures "this essential dynamic" (p.2). Although their examination of literature was done in higher education and not further education, it would seem a likely comparison that the same "masks" are affected in both institutions. In their literature survey they identified five pedagogic identities, four of which have been used in this study. The reason they are mentioned in this section on the teacher as deliverer is that one of their key points is that one of the most obvious omissions within the literature was about "the nature of knowledge and the teacher's role in its production" (p.6). If you are a deliverer of knowledge (or is it merely information?) then it appears that there is no intervention. The information or knowledge, comes directly to the student from a higher place and is delivered. The deliverer is merely a messenger, a person who hands over knowledge, neither involved in its production, validation or authorisation, but somehow separate, a mere go-between. The effect of this is that students may not question its source or its legitimation. These kinds of questions form the basis of critical pedagogy and are the essence of critical thinking. The data in my study suggests that the students thought that the lecturer had a pivotal role to play and that the questioning of the production of knowledge was an essential part of their learning development.

Teacher as role model

This role can assume many guises. The moral dimensions of the role model were not explicit in this study and perhaps inappropriate in an adult setting. The teacher can model thinking and practice through demonstration of skills. The lecturer who is an expert in their field can demonstrate this easily in some subject areas in college by

producing a product. This then stands up to scrutiny and is seen as an example to copy. However, producing a product and teaching someone how to replicate it and then moving on to produce an original design are two different things. For many subject areas, lecturers have been traditionally recruited on the basis of their ability in their field (usually of industry). What makes a good plumber may not necessarily make a good teacher of plumbing. The qualities may be in conflict. In my course, which was concerned with teaching, support and guidance, it was relatively simple to demonstrate skills in class. The subject was the skill. In other areas of the college curriculum, lecturers had to be good teachers as well as good plumbers, hairdressers etc.

While I would not go so far as Claxton (1999: 73) who says that "know-how and knowledge inhabit different worlds", it seems to be that the essence that turns know-how into knowledge may be the qualities necessary for teaching. The students' interview comments make a clear distinction between what the lecturer does, what skills they teach and *who they are.* (Although for Roslyn C. the subject and the teacher were one and the same.) What the data seems to be saying is that the role-modelling is not solely about the lecturer's competence in the craft (although that is rated highly) but that the lecturer's role as role model is about the management of the classroom, response to students' endeavours, support on all levels and an interest in their educational and life achievement. The Gallagher et al (2000) study supports these findings in both adult returners and young people. From my discussions with lecturers in other more practical based subjects, it is not the specific competencies that are taught but the peripheral cultural offshoots that are valued: the part of learning which enhances cultural capital.

Connelly and Halliday's (2001:191) study shows that students see good teaching as "not so much concerned with the detail of the competencies they acquire but how the lecturer is able to relate learning to life". To illustrate from a construction (wallpapering) class, the students learned a confidence which resulted in their ability to ask for a reference in a professional manner. This was in part due to the way their lecturer managed his class and presented himself as a role-model.

> It is clear that students want learning to connect to life as they live it locally and vice versa. The study points to a vision of lifelong learning in which resources to support life

are not seen as distinct from resources to support learning and in which people, rather than technical equipment are the primary resource. (Connelly and Halliday 2001: 191)

Teacher as mentor

Mentor implies guidance and tutelage. It is a term more akin to traditional definitions of teaching. It implies both trust and a position of power. The teacher has something to teach and the student has something to learn. The mentoring role combines modelling, guidance and an advisory capacity.

At some point, lecturers point to a "right way" ; at times, lecturers are teaching you from "out here" (Roslyn).There are occasions when students' experience, even with guided discourse and knowledge input, do not find the answer. Student groups can be solipsistic, particularly if they share similar social and geographical backgrounds, and bonding capital can be restricting in terms of becoming more knowledgeable. The "dark side" (Field 2003: 71) of this bonding is that it can become self-congratulatory and insular, endorsing narrow thinking through cultural reinforcement. The lecturer is there to represent alternatives and wider perspectives, not to just confirm their world views. The interviews and questionnaires in my study supported a vision of the lecturer as guide, both explicit and implicit. There was a consensus that praise and encouragement were motivators and the *"constant and instant"* feedback (Roslyn McI.) provided specific means for improvement. Roslyn C., the case study, said, "*I wouldn't have gone further if I hadn't had the motivation from staff…I still have the belief that has been instilled from college.*"

Teacher identities were useful in a comparative way with student identities not so much as a causal model (teacher type A creates students type B) but how they represent the complexities of a classroom which uses these multiple identities for learning.

Summary

To return to the question in the opening section of this chapter: *Does what we call ourselves as teachers reflect what we do?* To sum up, what I think I do in the classroom is to use reflection to initiate critical thinking and put it into a situated learning context. The methods I tend to use to facilitate this are discussion and scaffolding. I use the social dynamics of the group to encourage cognitive change. I call myself a teacher. My

students used the words: guide, leader, motivator and the person who tied it all up. Their definition of learning was less cognitive than mine. They considered the emotional aspects and the social interaction as paramount. (If we refer back to the questionnaire, only two of the answers contained any mention of learning as a cognitive activity.)

Returning to the research issues stated in Chapter 1, the above chapter has taken on board the following:

the relationship between teaching and learning and the students' performance;

their definition of themselves as learners and its relationship to their success;

the relationship between the learning community and their individual outcomes;

the implications for staff development training in FE, assuming that elements of the educational experience can be generalised into a teaching model.

Through the examination of existing theories and approaches and how we are moulded and mould ourselves as teachers and learners, we may find a basis for selection, using historical perspectives, current praxis and the data from the students' interviews.

CHAPTER 9

TEACHING MODEL

> …a learning-focused perspective provides a radically different view of a learning society from that afforded by a training-focused perspective. (Eraut et al 2000: 240)

The model required for staff development is based on the findings of this research. The model proposed is "learning-focused". Let us assume that there is a model of "the good teacher". Let us also assume that staff development is designed to match that model. This chapter will lay down the principles of this model, show how they relate to existing professional development guidelines and then transpose these principles into some new identities for staff and students. These new identities are not radically different from the ones presented in the previous chapter. Anything "radically different" in conservative places like FE colleges, which hang onto past custom and practice like lifebelts, would not be practically feasible. Like most change which involves learning, new ideas must be pinned to old. A "training-focused perspective" would have, at its heart, competency based teaching and learning. A "learning-focused" perspective would have to incorporate some of the tenets of this approach.

Smaller than life

The need for "new" identities arose because, once principles for the model had been drawn up using the data and the teaching and learning identities (examined in Chapter 8), it seemed as if they did not live up to the vibrancy of the picture that the students had painted. From the researcher's perspective, it appeared that the theories, "identities" and principles reduced the experience to less than it was. It did not represent adequately the depth of change that the students had undergone. New definitions and different theories were required to represent the whole learning experience of the students.

Cognition and socio-emotional aspects of learning

As previously mentioned, apart from being more open-minded, thinking more deeply and reading more, the students gave little details of the cognitive aspects of learning.

Linking individual cognitive activity to the social and emotional dynamics of group activity proved to be a way of using the data, threading it through some theories which were more adequate than the teacher and learner identities presented in Chapter 8 in terms of representing the process, and then emerging with an analysis of the learning experience.

Connected knowers and critical thinkers

It is evident from the data that speaking and listening with others was a prime source of knowledge for the HNSLN students. It was also a key factor that they used information and lecture content to inform their thinking alongside the experiential discourse in the classroom. Contextualising this knowledge was also important to them. Finally, they combined this process into their own frame of reference in making sense of a revised view of the world. Of course it wasn't as linear or perspicacious as it sounds, nor was it true for all the students; a tentative suggestion would be that the adult returners would have probably reached these stages by the time they graduated but that the school leavers were still working towards a similar pattern of thinking. Belenky's profile describes the pattern of thinking that closely approximates the students' comments. She sums up the complex process of how people's thinking shifts and calls the final product, a "connected knower".

> Connected knowers develop procedures for gaining access to other people's knowledge…they know that they can only approximate other people's experiences so can gain only limited access to their knowledge… (they) begin with an interest in the facts of other people's lives, but they gradually shift the focus to other people's ways of thinking…(they) see personality as adding to the perception and so the personality of each member of the group enriches the group's understanding. (Belenky 1986: 113,115 and 119)

The students in this study used the experience within the group and had access to each other's knowledge through the culture of sharing that existed. They trusted that experience because they knew each other. They also trusted the tutor's rendering and use of that experience. The source of the speech was essential to its usefulness. Billy said, *"It was easier to speak to each other. We were all parents."* The task for the teacher is to create conditions for this interactive learning to occur.

> The connected teacher tries to create groups in which members can nurture each other's thoughts to maturity. (Belenky 1986: 221)

Intellectually they move from absolute answers which are "correct", usually owned or authenticated by a figure of academic authority, to knowledge being qualitative and contextual and then on to a sense of placement; their position in relation to that set of ideas. Entwistle (1991, 1996) has a similar set of ideas which will be discussed in relation to deep learning in the next section.

The learner as critical thinker was an identity discussed in Chapter 8. The students used this thinking to reflect on practice (learner as reflective practitioner was also discussed as an identity). The students had an understanding of themselves as learners and that their behaviour as learners results in a more critically reflective attitude to learning. One of the conditions for learning for those with fragile learning identities is that the student needs to be prepared to take on a new learner identity. They may need to re-examine how they view ability, either as innate and immutable or as capable of changing and developing. Informing students about Dweck's (2000) theory (see Chapter 7 for an explanation) may increase their knowledge but, until they can be shown how they can alter their learning ability, they may not change their beliefs. If you belong, like Roslyn C., to that species who has "a long history of being stupid", success needs to be tangible and possibly, public. This can be done in small ways through dialogue in class, through passing assignments and through positive feedback from placement. References to improvement and development and teaching them how to assess their own learning pathways raise their understanding of the importance of their learner identity. Most of the interviewees came to look at themselves as learners and saw that change from marginal participant to something approaching a lifelong learner. Critical thinking taught them to challenge those assumptions about intelligence and learning upon which the school learner identity was based.

Deep and surface learning

Many of the students said that the learning approach encouraged "deeper thinking" (Pamela). It is the change in the person which relates to the social theory of learning above (Belenky 1986) and which the data from the interviews reveal. How we approach

learning depends on our reasons for learning and each approach was related to motivation in research done by Entwistle and colleagues (1991: 4). Surface approach learning was associated with "anxiety and fear of failure" whereas deep learning was linked to an interest in the subject and self-confidence. While this is not necessarily a causal relationship it may be that those who are more confident people/students employ deeper methods; on the other hand the evidence from my students shows that they enjoyed deeper learning as they became more confident and that the type of self-directed learning with freer boundaries gave them more confidence. The relationship was dialectical. If students are more aware of the metacognitive processes of learning they can take control of their learning so that the parameters can be self-appointed. Rather than learn the basic mechanical study skills which students do not transfer out of context (Entwistle 1991) understanding the process of their learning helps them become self-directed learners. Just as conditional learning (Langer et al 1989) teaches flexibility, so too does knowledge of process allow for a flexibility of application. It gives them a cognitive "compass" (Field 2000: 51) to carry into the changing world.

Entwistle (1991: 4) found that deep approaches were common in departments where students rated the teaching highly and where they were allowed "freedom". Students in my study used similar images of freedom (being "allowed" to have their own opinions) when they expressed the liberation and openness in being allowed to follow their own paths in learning. Entwistle implies a connection between freedom in learning and innovative teaching methods which encourage "independence and self-reliance" (1991: 5) to deep learning. Application and the creation of something "novel" (Bruner 1979: ix) require deep learning. Assessments which test information knowledge (assessments were rated the least important factor on the questionnaire) and overloaded fact-filled courses only increase students' reliance on surface learning.

Discourse

How did the contributor, the collective and the discursive activity relate to learning? Was there more than a social exchange of knowledge or did it reflect and/or create a more egalitarian set of structures which resulted in more effective learning? Did the communal sense of "*we're all in the same boat*" (Susan) have anything more than a warm feeling of shared doom? They used each other to give them confidence to confirm,

affirm and question knowledge. The "constant and instant" feedback came in the "verification from others" (Roslyn McI.). They moved from reference to authority to more "connected knowers" (Belenky 1986: 113), using themselves as the processors of others' knowledge. They made this transition in part through language. Their linguistic behaviour changed. They used language to think and explore partly through role-modelling the tutor and partly because the nature of the cognitive task pushed them into it. The tutor's role, to "tie it all up", was done in a way which also opened them up to a wider repertoire of linguistic styles. Simply put, the language they bought to college wasn't versatile enough or precise enough to measure up to the task of deep thinking.

The language of practice was also an area where they learned linguistic adaptability. The tutor's role was to listen to but also to listen out for opportunities where discourse could be used to enhance thinking and improve practice through application of that thinking. Matching the discourse of the practice to that of instruction seems to be a two-edged sword. Learning to do a job may involve the same vocabulary as learning more objective information, but it seems to me that we think and speak differently in a classroom than we do in the community of practice. The language of instruction and demonstration and advice requires less tentative and more concrete registers and structures than does the language of exploration. For example, the language of exploration would not be as useful in a painting and decorating class, although I have heard it used to good effect.

Storytelling – ways of knowing

> We are all continuously involved in the process of adding new stories to our own sustaining fictions. Stories are renewed, reconstructed, or abandoned but are always central to the individual's presentation of self and sense of personal identity. (Elwyn and Gwyn 1999: 187-88)

Using narrative to learn is effective because it allows us a personal place in the events. The narrator and the listener can construct an identity (Bruner 1996). It is also a way of ordering and storing knowledge (Hunter 1991) because of its familiar structure. Stories allow for interpretation and prediction; they contain morals and have players we recognise. The structure contains universal principles; the unfolding of events takes place through characters, their relationships with each other and with their culture. They

allow for extraordinary events to be contrasted with the ordinary. In the classroom they allow everyone to participate through telling and listening for application to their particular circumstances. The act of telling stories re-affirms the place of learning in life.

Learning, earning and being: some assumptions

Roddy said that you couldn't detach the job and the study. Ann made similar comments about the connection between learning at work and at college. Both were adult returners on day release course from work in schools for children with severe learning difficulties. As day release students, they were, perhaps, more conscious than the full-time students that their work was financing them to attend college and that they were held to account. However, they did not reduce the learning experience to this accountability and the day-release students contributed greatly to the learning of the whole group, both in terms of expertise in the field and in their maturity of perspective.

> No worthwhile vision of the learning society can ignore the enormous potential for learning provided by the workplace, especially when this is integrated with learning in other settings… (Spours et al 2000: 98)

Many of the principles in the following model are integrally bound to a work context whether it be in the college workshops or in work placements outside college. However, their intention is not to limit their use to a specific vocation. The vocational context provides meaningful application; the meaning, however, does not need to be confined by its context. A set of principles can be proposed which can assume that they have relevance for the qualities required for learning in a practical context which affects the way you think about your world. These principles are built on techniques which, in theory, increase confidence in learning, change thinking habits and affect application of knowledge.

The conditional approach

> There is a great deal of power in uncertainty…As scientists, all of our experimental results are reported as probabilities. (Langer et al 1989: 149)

We know from the study by Langer et al (1989) that knowledge presented in a conditional way leads to the students engaging in a more critical and creative way. Margaret's "(the lecturer was) *steering us to a right, if there is a right, answer*" is an illustration of the way the students in this study began to see things through these conditional lenses. As a teacher I am, of course, interested in the qualifying phrase, "*if there is a right*", as within that dubiety sits an understanding that some knowledge is conditional. This is one of the more difficult forms of thinking to coach, particularly to students who are used to authority in the classroom and information as non-negotiable. The kind of school background that some of these second chance learners had come from meant that there was no room to question authority in the classroom and therefore, information had to be absorbed unquestioned and regurgitated (many of the interviewees expressed a dissatisfaction with this type of learning). Encouraging students to think about knowledge, to apply it to their practical experience and reach some alternative ideas, starts with the process of the tutor presenting some knowledge as conditional. It is vital, of course, to be discriminatory in deciding which knowledge cannot be presented as conditional. This classroom methodology underpins an ethos of negotiability both in terms of the epistemology of knowledge and also in the relationship between teaching staff and students.

Competency based learning

In a college of further education, teaching mainly vocational subjects which are skill-based, there is the tendency (more a tradition) to teach and assess on a competency basis. Gorard and Rees (2002) argue against the competency based, work assessed courses for the same behaviourist reasons as others (Elbow 1979; Ashworth and Saxton 1990). It is difficult to assess what learning is taking place when it is not observable. If you see learning as a sign of outward behaviour only (which is the only "true" evidence in empirical terms) then it may be missing the point about learning. Gorard and Rees argue against this functional attitude towards learning which serves the "tick box" culture using education and training to endorse human capital arguments.

Ashworth and Saxton (1990) advise against the competence approach for the following reason: predetermined goals and targets may be a barrier to more creative thinking. Students don't go beyond the prescribed goal. (There is a current tendency to design assignments so thoroughly that nothing is left to the student nor can he/she make

judgements about the depth and quantity of the pursuit. It has all been tied up.) For my students this was neither enriching in an educational sense nor was it representative of conditions in the working world where targets and goals tend to be fuzzy, negotiable, context-driven and altogether less concrete than college paperwork is. The question for us and this study is, how to set up minimum technical requirements for skills for the job and how to leave it open and layer it so that the students finds what s/he needs to learn? We need to leave spaces open for exploration; the sideways approach, the leave-it-alone-to-let-it-nurture approach, while full of pitfalls, allows time and space for thinking: Elbow (1979: 132) recommends

> …to not-try, to unclench from the harness of a goal for a while and engage in non-instrumental behaviour.

Competency based learning can be looked at in a wider way:

> An element of competence describes what can be done; an action, behaviour or outcome…the knowledge or understanding which is essential if performance is to be sustained or extended to new situations… (Ashworth and Saxton 1990: 8)

Knowledge and understanding can be fragmented into components and competencies but, for anyone who has tried this, it leaves an unsatisfactory gap: the whole appears to be more than the sum of its parts.

Elbow sees competence based learning as a paradox. It attracts those instrumental "no-nonsense" people who like everything set down so that everyone knows what is happening. "Engaging in non-instrumental behaviour" (Elbow 1979: 132) is not for them. This often means that there is less conflict over assessments and what is required so that teacher/student relationships can be more positive. This approach can also encourage self-directed learning in that the students know what they have to do and can make their own decisions within those parameters. If the competencies aren't laid down, it could lead to a situation where the lecturer may be seen to be non-negotiable. However, he agrees with Ashworth and Saxton (1990) that it can lead to a mechanistic, goal-oriented, instrumental approach to learning. What Elbow argues for is to use competency based learning to establish a goalless learning programme. One of the

competencies could be to determine your own research area. While everyone should know where the goalposts are, the goals can be left up to the more indeterminate elements of the learning game.

So the case for competency is, it situates, concretizes, sorts and demystifies technical aspects of learning. These are also the reasons not to use it. Elbow (1979: 132) sums up the reasons against this goal-oriented approach:

> …it seems to me that people who care too desperately about knowing exactly what they are doing and why, what the goal is, and how terms are defined, often have a tendency to run away from ambiguity, uncertainty, and contrary voices from within and without – a tendency that tends to lead to behaviour that is dogmatic, inflexible, and sometimes just plain stupid. If people listen only to voices they understand or proceed only according to plan, they cut themselves off from half their intelligence. *In many situations, nothing is more likely to preclude good thinking than defining terms at the start.* (my italics)

Italics are used above because it is almost a direct copy of what my students said about self-directed learning. "Run(ning) away from ambiguity, uncertainty and contrary voices" does not lead to critical thinking or reflect real-life dilemmas.

Evidence exists (Ashworth and Saxton 1990; Lave and Wenger 2002) that competencies are not necessarily transferable to contexts other than those in which they were measured because, unless the skills for transferring knowledge are present, it may not happen. These skills are the ability to identify needs in new situations, reorganise, accommodate and adapt learning. What might a list of these skills look like?

By the end of this outcome the student should be able to:

reflect on experience;

learn from critical examination of that experience;

apply theories to context;

apply experience to context;

analyse relevant parts of context;

ask right questions at right time;

introduce examples and anecdotes at appropriate junctures;

think of and apply appropriate solutions;

receive advice and constructive criticism;

act on advice;

try novel approaches.

The list resembles a competency based one: it just appears to be something you couldn't tick. This presents difficulties for assessment as many of these skills are interactive, dependent on a group approach, and assessment is usually carried out on an individual basis.

Culture of the classroom: the social model of learning

What is required of the model is to make learning into a "communal activity, a sharing of the culture" (Bruner 1986: 127) and to create that culture in and of the classroom by linking the individual to the other individuals through different frameworks of learning. It is a socio-psychological process which has its origins and raison d'etre in cognition. The community becomes more than the sum of its parts and the dialectical process has, as its end result, a new way of looking at knowledge through the membership of this learning community.

There are many definitions of social learning, from Bandura's (1986) observed behaviour model to Lave and Wenger's situated cognition within communities of practice (1991). What they hold in common is an understanding that learning occurs in social contexts, with and through people. We learn within communities of learners and teachers (sometimes these teachers are fellow students). Learning is not an isolated and individualised process that occurs in the brain only (although some thinking happens this way). What we need to tease out of the situation is an understanding of the elements of this social setup that occurs sometimes in the classroom, sometimes in the canteen and sometimes in the workplace. Those serendipitous other happenings of cognitive insight may require more knowledge of cognitive psychology than this research allows for.

To reach for and find that stasis in a classroom of learning where events work to a predictable rhythm requires that you first understand and analyse the methodological approach necessary for your students in your subject. Predictability and change need to be balanced so that new learning is affixed to old. In creating and then managing the rituals of the classroom the lecturer is open to the way the students learn, the constraints

of the subject and the extent to which the lecturer's "style" can accommodate these. It is to understand the difference between teaching methods and pedagogy.

> Teaching is an act while pedagogy is both act and discourse. Pedagogy encompasses the performance of teaching together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it…Pedagogy connects the apparently self-contained act of teaching with culture, structure and mechanisms of social control. (Alexander quoted in Coffield et al 2004: 131)

To give an example from practice where these two are confused is when we try to match learning styles with teaching approaches and end up with a mess because we haven't laid the groundwork for creating a culture in the classroom which sees it as a group of people learning more than "visually" or "kinaesthetically". As my students tried to tell me, these individual learning style approaches aren't important, although they help to sustain interest: what is the essence is not the way resources (rated low in the questionnaire) are used but how the methods in the form of that "human event", the teacher and students, come to "gel" (Roddy) and become a part of a learning culture. The first task of the lecturer is to define (as clearly as this elusive task is) what type of ethos and culture s/he wants to promote in the classroom. Once accomplished, the next step is to be prepared for the students to change it.

In the conclusion section of Chapter 5, it was stated that students wanted to be taught by a variety of methods but that discussion, group work and interaction were the most effective means of learning. Trust and reciprocity is engendered through discussion. The discussion has at its base an understanding of an exchange of ideas rooted in critical thinking (Brookfield 1998). Information is delivered in a conditional way to encourage engagement through critique and this aids memory and understanding (Langer et al 1989). Stories from practice also encourage engagement and validate other communities where learning takes place. Since most of the adult learners did their most positive learning at work it creates confidence to validate that learning within the site of more traditionally appraised learning. This validates both. By encouraging the validity of idiosyncratic thinking and allowing the students independent study, the teacher is communicating a message of trust in their ability to decide their own learning structures. This in turn creates a culture of independence.

Thus self-directed learning becomes a social commitment and a cognitive process. Oral presentations also increase confidence because it exposes the learning in a formalised way to public scrutiny (albeit within the cosy confines of the bonded group). Cultural capital in the form of "*I became a reader*" (Joanne) is difficult to measure in terms of social capital although it would seem likely that it increases a sense of access to a wider world. It is uncertain whether wider reading means more connections to others and I suspect few people travel in social circles where it is commonplace to ask, "What are you reading at the moment?" although that is a question I do ask of my students. To refer to Field's (2000: 51) metaphor about the compass again, it gives them more points of reference on the compass, I think.

Methods are not a case of deciding whether to be teacher or student centred, andragogy or pedagogy, but flexibility between the domains. Students go through stages of thinking from increasing knowledge to changing as a person (Entwistle 1991, 1996 and Belenky 1986). To make that grand a leap and to cater for the stages in between requires a multiplicity of events.

The Bigger Picture

Social Capital

When the students were asked what made them think they could succeed, some of their responses were surprising. "*I hadn't thought that far – of succeeding and getting a job*" (Dorothy). Success…*It wasn't part of the thought process*" (John). They took a chance in the hope of getting something back. Coleman's (1988) notion of social capital rests on this trust in reciprocity. Who has this and how it is acquired cannot be estimated from this study. It would be safe to assume that all the students with no Highers took a chance on success, although most of them had some indication from experience outside school that they could succeed. Most of the answers to the interview question on success were positive, 20 students having gained the confidence from the networks they were already in. For that group of the most disaffected students who attend further education colleges (none of whom were, in my estimation, in my study), the ones who have been unemployed and not had the opportunity to gain an understanding of their ability in a different context from school, these must rely on their own sense of resource. Where they get this sense can't be answered here and it seems to me that the group of people

that FE is trying to influence who are the farthest out on the social periphery, are not the ones most suitable for learning strategies that are proposed here. That is not to say that some elements couldn't be used but that the principles' efficacy is dependent on the students having some sense and understanding of their aptitude for success. This is, of course, not to say that, like Elaine and Roslyn and John, the three case studies, they are not full of self doubt throughout their career pathway and ultimately surprised at their success in gaining a degree.

An understanding of how sharing in the classroom can be linked to social capital can be seen in Elaine's comments. At first, she said she saw learning as communal only a "*wee bit...I was in it for myself*". When asked what she shared with the group, she said, *"I would have shared everything...we studied together*". Although these comments appear contradictory, they explain the individualistic and communal aspects of social capital.

> An individual who serves as a source of information for another because he is well-informed ordinarily acquires that information for his own benefit, not for the others who make use of him. (Coleman 1988: S117)

What is to be noted here in relation to Elaine's comments is that she had something to trade; she was "resource-rich" and she was also willing to share those resources. The norm was that she was expected to share. Students are quick to discern which members of the class are "useful". One of the students who had some difficulties was certain that others "*would get it*" and would share this understanding with her. For those students who had little to trade, the lecturer's task was to make the resource-poor students more well-informed and confident so that they did have something to trade.

The trust and sharing that the students experienced in the classroom made them good group members. The classroom is a community, operating with a set of explicit and implicit norms; sometimes these communal norms came into conflict with educational aspirations. Communality in the classroom does not necessarily indicate consensual action or thinking; consensus would probably not be endorsed by the lecturer either as it would not foster critical thinking. However, within this group, often the students did forfeit intellectual honesty to maintain group cohesion.

It may be that, at some point, the ties and bonds have to be loosened in the interests of further learning, independence and creating bridging links with other networks. Once the exclusionary aspects of bonding capital set in, the students can become insular and closed to creating new ties with less familiar contacts. Bonding capital within a small group in the classroom, as the data in this study has indicated, is very useful in terms of building up confidence and access to knowledge and thereby gaining a qualification. However, unless this confidence and qualifications afford access to bridging capital where links with wider networks provide opportunities for work and citizenship, there may be little structural change for the disadvantaged.

A story from a cohort of students who went on to do a degree at a university about 15 miles from the college will serve to illustrate the negative aspects of bonding. Approximately six students who had passed their HND went on to complete a third year in Educational Studies, a generic degree in education. This FE group was called "the FE group" by the lecturers at university and judging from the stories from my ex-students, the groups did not mix either in class or outside class. The other students had entered university with Highers and had been there for two years. The FE group used their knowledge of additional support needs and their practical placement to pass judgement on the rest of the group who had had less classroom experience. They told me that "the BA group know nothing about special needs." This superiority of knowledge appeared to make the bonding between the FE group more fixed and they turned inwards towards each other, for resources. This behaviour is perfectly understandable in the light of where these FE students had started; however, it seems here that they missed an opportunity to access a network which may have provided them with social capital, opting instead for a more inward looking reliance on the limited social capital of their fellow travellers.

Coleman (1988: S119) indicates that the norms in any group are "accompanied by sanctions": whether these are determined by the lecturers or students is difficult to say and beyond the scope of this research. One of the norms is to forego self-interest and act in the interests of the collective (Coleman 1988). Although, as mentioned earlier, this can act against the ethos of critical thinking, this may be one of the few opportunities for them to act as a collective. Membership of a group with solidarity and some power may be a rare experience for them. It is the lecturer's task to further the questioning of

"common sense" discourses while maintaining that norm of collective interest ("*making everyone as one*" Nicci).

Strong networks and educational attainment are mutually reinforcing. (Field 2005: 4)

Field (2003) links social capital with lifelong learning and better citizenship. He does not discuss learning in detail although he does suggest that increased confidence enables people to access networks. It would be useful to look at how we build up social capital within the classroom through bonding ("getting by") and then bridging (getting "on"). Linking capital ("getting ahead") is the move beyond the networks and circles formed through bridging (Field 2003). Where students went on to study for further degrees or gained promotion outside the vocational and geographical area, it is possible that they used a wide network. My guess would be that, given the geographically confined nature of most of the students and their unwillingness to travel, (even Fife was too far – geographically speaking) their job prospects were restricted and so, too, was the enlargement of their networks. The reciprocity, trust and communality found in this type of classroom may mirror the theoretical frameworks with which Field assesses other aspects of society. When he says, "Adult learners are joiners and vice versa" (Field 2003: 38), the taking part has begun in the classroom and, in a way, that can be replicated elsewhere. Whether the confidence gained in the bonding within the classroom is enough to help them make that bigger leap outside their own west of Scotland community (the linking aspect of social capital) was not evident from this study.

The classroom community has elements of social capital: bonding capital can be built up by sharing skills and creating trust through the exchange of diverse ideas and attitudes. We see from the data that the students took on board the responsibility for determining the frameworks for their own learning which contributed to confidence and increased desire for more learning. This sub-culture enabled them to access networks and links through work placement to gain employment and increase prospects.

The sound of the shipyard
Can we "see" social capital in the classroom? Throughout this study, whenever I reread the interviews and the classroom scenarios were replayed, one particular class session

kept recurring (in my mind; there was no mention of it from the students). The discussion topic for that class session was sensory methods of learning. We talked about how sight, sound and touch were integral, implicit aspects of learning and how you could use multi-sensory approaches in the classroom. One student, an adult returner in her 40s, talked about how, as a child, when they could hear the hammers at the hulls in the shipyard, this meant prosperity and harmony in the house and in the streets of Port Glasgow. Another student, in his 20s, also from Port Glasgow, added some teenage memories and the rest of the class either listened or told their stories about the shipyard. This discussion (or perhaps storytelling) went on far longer than the required time allocated for that section of the curriculum. The interest was obvious and the storytellers had a rapt audience. Stories rolled from one to another. It was one of the occasions where the lecturer did not take a pivotal role except as listener.

The reason this storytelling seemed to resonate for me was that it contained principles of action as well as exemplified a dynamic of social capital. First of all, the students were discussing a culture built around an industry that was on its last legs as they were talking about it (one shipyard remains in Port Glasgow in 2007). The shipyard families were a community rich in bonding capital and this was measured in community responsibility and engagement. It was also rich in human capital. The sons and daughters of these shipyard workers were now sitting in a classroom, training for careers that had replaced the old ones. They needed to leave the college with more than a training certificate: they required the social capital that came with the jobs in the shipbuilding industry, to understand the ties and the creation of new social capital. One of the ways of creating this understanding was to nurture story telling with a purpose so that the dynamics of the classroom, in a small way, replicated the bonding capital of that community.

Using data from the study, the norms of the classroom which related to social capital were:

> validation through certification;
>
> reciprocity in shared learning practices;
>
> trust in group and lecturer;
>
> expression of ideas and opinions;
>
> taking on board the views of others;
>
> sharing skills;

practical work experience providing networks;

becoming a member of a community of practice ("courses with an inbuilt group cohesion relating to the norms and values of a profession or calling" had lower withdrawal rates (McGivney 1996: 136);

responsibility for own learning;

directing own learning;

accepting the culture of conditional learning.

The last three are perhaps too individual to classify as social capital (perhaps cultural capital would be a more precise definition) but those members who were considered to be "resource-rich" were those who ascribed to this definition of their responsibilities as a learner.

Networks, norms, reciprocity and trust

What became the norms of the classroom? Reciprocity and trust were products of discussions, group activity, storytelling and collaborative working. The most obvious way to increase networks is through practical placement. There are versions of this throughout the college from sending students out to industry on placement to treating clients within the college. Supervisors from work placements who are invited as speakers to the college are valuable contacts. Student research also encourages the making of contacts which opens up opportunities. If the research is theirs and they are encouraged to create the parameters then this can give them confidence in speaking to people, asking them questions and using sources other than books which tend to be safe and lack the vaguaries of communication. On two courses which I teach on (only one was used in this research) there is an independent study and research module which encourages students to go out and talk to the practitioners and policy implementers in different fields. The research could be criticised for its non-rigorous approach to methodology; by this I mean that the students were only lightly tethered by academic rules. Their refreshing attitudes to legitimacy of sources made for some entertaining classroom discussion. They found information on local resources from "*this wee woman up a close who told us…*" This hovers between happenstance and investigative journalism but bona fide research it probably isn't. It is clear that the wider gain in making contacts, deciding what is useful and perceiving when the official line is being given, are all lessons in how knowledge is used in the world of policy. It is an invaluable

lesson for students in that the personal search for some kind of understanding is firstly not a priority for the outside world, nor is it often of primary interest to convey a sense of meaning to an inquisitive student: the student-researchers also learn that knowledge has its own political dimensions and that by asking a question on provision of services they may receive an answer which has less to do with their academic/ scholarly enlightenment and more to do with a sense of the institution's own public face. The students are often quick to discern the dissembler. In each case, different ways of being and behaving are required.

Having a recognised qualification enabled the students to become part of a new group of workers. For those that went on to higher education, they found another set of networks. The incremental nature of the certification at further education college (NC, then HNC, then HND) allows confidence building. The public face of ceremonies and validation also aids a change in learner identity. Many of the students interviewed valued the graduation ceremony. The bonding capital created within the classroom helps with confidence in using the networks created through practical application. This bridging capital can open up job opportunities and allows them to see themselves as legitimate members of a wider community – the employed and the qualified.

How this relates to staff development

Part of the researcher's remit, was responsibility for delivering staff training in classroom practice. In an area (further education) where there is no external curriculum support and the practical/vocational emphasis can counteract the reflective dimensions, it is important to strike a balance so that you do not lose the audience. Some of my colleagues are impatient with the notions of metacognition because they haven't got the time to construct a piece of furniture, let alone educate the "whole person". Within the grand design of trying to effect a change in the institutional culture, there is a voice which can become a persistent whine which requires the measurement of success by outcome. In other words, performance must be measured and, for the college to justify financing staff development, it needs to have results. These results are, once again, not measured in terms of accumulated learning but in terms of whether they have produced the paperwork performance. Attendance at workshops and having feedback on classroom observation doesn't serve as proof of purchase.

The guidelines for teaching in further education, *The Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges,* (The Scottish Executive: 2006) contain "not overly prescriptive" (p.4) standards which were intended for use for a range of continuing professional development needs. Like many guidelines, they are sound in terms of creating a model for how lecturers should perform in the classroom. Apart from the scarcity of the word, "teaching", there is little here to argue against and since it is designed for a range of staff, from unqualified to those requiring updating of "old" skills, it needs to remain generic; although "understanding and using educational theories" (p.5) would indicate that some of the trainees have teacher training.

There are some expectations of the type of lecturer-student relationship they would wish to promulgate. Learner feedback is meant to be used to improve practice. The practical reality of this is that the information was gathered (in this college) either through tick-box questionnaires or more qualitative, discursive type questions. Neither proved that helpful, the answers being cursory and vague. While these course evaluation forms were considered valuable in terms of quality assurance, they were of little use in improving practice. Much effort was spent in making the form more useful. This seems to be a feature of further education (perhaps education in general). Much time is spent on changing the forms to gather the information to apply it to practice. By the time we are armed with enough information for application, it has been decided elsewhere that the form doesn't ask the right questions so we begin the process again. While the suggestion to improve practice through learner feedback is laudable and educationally sound, it would require more investigative research than the average lecturer has the time or expertise to conduct.

Lecturers are meant to be "co-learners" (The Scottish Executive 2006: 4). Whether this is an expression of reciprocity and collaboration within the classroom to enhance learning or whether it is a more woolly attempt to fudge power relations within the classroom is impossible to assess. Perhaps the assumption here is that the lecturer has something to learn as well as teach and this collaborative position somehow enhances learning. If co-learning is shorthand for some form of attitudinal stance on the part of the lecturer, a laisser-faire attempt at some vague "sharing" of ideas, it would not confirm the data in my study. The interviewees had a picture of a lecturer who took responsibility for the organisation of the classroom, the management and critical examination of ideas

in a context of learning. If, by co-learning, they mean that the lecturer would improve practice by critically appraising what they are doing, this would seem to fit in with the approach in the HNSLN course.

Policy restraints: sharing good practice

To be innovative, risks need to be taken. The possibility of failure underwrites this approach. Policy makers, like some of Dweck's (2000) students, don't have the perception of self to try something that hasn't been proven in the classroom, so we have as a pinnacle of excellence, the sharing of good practice. While it would be facile to deny the benefits of this, it is not a way of discovering new ways – the unpractised, the uncertain, the unthought-of. Proven success only gives us more of the same and in a profession which has initiative fatigue, it may be that we should settle for that.

> It (innovative behaviour) is not best promoted by bodies whose behaviour only provides models of caution, suspicion and restraint. And rather than evidence-based policy which demonstrates 'what works', policy makers and researchers alike will have to accept a degree of uncertainty: what we need is 'what might work', and not what has already been tried and tested. (Field 2006: 18)

Estelle Morris (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2001-2) backs this up:

> Sharing someone else's good practice is never going to be enough. The
> talent that will be needed more and more is that of doing things in different ways,
> solving problems that have not been solved. (Education Guardian 26.9.06: 4)

For some, educational effort is, in itself, rewarding; there is a type of learner who is susceptible to lifelong learning and who, given a type of education, applies that learning to all areas of his/her life. Pedagogy can determine an understanding of how to learn which makes workers more perceptive and people more open to continuing education. The expectation is not that there will be a fundamentally new package for delivery but that contextual relationships can be outlined so that cognitive development can take place within a social context of learning and that situations can be replicated to create effective conditions for learning. Both Entwistle (1996) and Hodkinson and James

(2003) advocate a context-specific approach – which students, which course, which college.

> Psychologists are coming to the view that 'ability' is often highly situation specific, and is better seen as a learnable tool-kit of cognitive strategies and resources. (Claxton 1996: 55)

This quote contains answers and warnings. The expression "learnable tool-kit" will set the research and policy machine on "search" for prescriptive answers. What are they, for whom, in what context: all of which are often dependent on many variables.

The teaching/learning model

The "really useful" part of this research was to be the model. The task was to present a model for learners which would encompass the social, emotional and cognitive requirements for benefiting from the second chance. It also had to accommodate the other part of the class who had had some success at school whose main issue was that college required that you take on responsibility for your own learning. It had to incorporate the following ideas.

1. The acknowlegement of the importance of discourse and the place of discussion in classroom activity. Building up language communities through storytelling was important in this context.

2. The improvement of self-confidence through a more positive learner identity: turning the reluctant learner into a lifelong one. Reconstructing the individual's disposition to learn means knowing how learning occurs for them and applying this knowledge.

3. To see the process of learning and teaching as interactive mirrors, as participatory, communal and directive at the same time. To encourage deep learning through liberative dependence approaches, encouraging self-directed study through the provision of loose parameters and conditional structures.

It is a strange irony that although teachers are impatient of the instrumental stance of some of their students – "Why do we have to know this? Are we going to be tested on it?" the teachers are, themselves, instrumental in what they want for training. Many teachers go to workshops to look for a worksheet. The pressures of teaching require that unless the result can be used in the classroom then there isn't time for the more leisurely

pursuit of learning about pedagogy, in general. Impatience is a general attribute in learning: there isn't time for the things that take time. So, in response to this need there would be suggestions for a model.

From model to principles

At the beginning of the project, it was thought that the respondents would list a set of teaching methods and by matching them to the way they learned and more general aspects of their learning experience gained from the questionnaires and interviews, a model could be produced which was flexible enough to be useful for mixed groups of students in the college classroom. As the research progressed I realised that while **support from staff, teaching methods** and **practical placement** (which were seen as a foundation for both knowledge and application) were the top priorities for the students, they were unable and at times, unwilling, to specify on the methods beyond "discussion was good".

Expectations of research outcomes usually prove to be too neat. Mine were confounded by two aspects. The first block to my tidy proposal was that students were not to be drawn on specific and detailed methods used in the classroom. As previously mentioned, the students' reticence to be drawn on specific details was not through lack of knowledge since they were immersed in the knowledge of learning processes. But when they were asked in the interview to cite methods they appeared to lapse into vagueness and some said they didn't know. My first impression was that they couldn't remember or hadn't / couldn't analyse a process as it was happening to them. However, this interpretation appeared to be at odds with the rest of the data where they demonstrated evidence of being able to do this (see summary of interviews Chapter 5). On reflection, the vague allusions became a knowing insistence on presenting the bigger picture. It was the grander events of the learning experience that were important to them. My dilemma then became how to represent these grander events as a model.

Apart from the mention of "discussion" which was consistent and unequivocal, there were no detailed methods. Not only was the "tips for teachers" model receding into the distance, but the model that was beginning to emerge was one which contained more radical and therefore, more complex to execute, elements – elements that were almost impossible to teach/learn in a traditional way. The fact that discussion appeared to be

one of the few simple elements that could be tabulated in a teaching model was, rather than a relief, a new area for examination because of its singularity. Closer examination of the interviews revealed that discussion was not the ultimate teaching tool but that this activity represented particular teacher/student and student/student relationships. It was not only the talk, ideas and opinions expressed but what listening to them meant. It meant that transformation was occurring not only in the discourse but, more importantly, around the discourse.

The second outcome that confounded my neat expectation of a teaching model was that the students' appraisal of the socio-emotional factors of learning were more detailed and precise than the cognitive elements. One of the quotes that informed my teaching and upon which this dissertation was built, was one on cognition (see Chapter 1 page 11 where Bruner's quotation explains "hunches"). How was a teaching/learning model to express socio-emotional elements within a cognitive framework; to express their intellectual development through their development of self ? To disentangle discrete elements in such an interwoven and commingled experience is complex. At times, answers could be reduced to learning being dependent on the teacher's personality and how the relationship between the students and teacher supported learning. The task was to link the cognitive/intellectual domain upon which my own training and experience were embedded, to the more socio-emotional aspects of classroom relationships.

Like Brookfield, I do not think there exists a "grand narrative of practice" (1998: 140). Models are context-specific, and are presented as exemplars to be modified. All principles need to take on the complexion of the people involved. These principles are, broadly speaking, based on a learner-centred developmental model. To implement effectively they would have to be part of a mentoring system where new lecturers were attached to more experienced ones and the ideology of staff development would have to reach beyond the limitations of appraisal and see the process as one of learning and (true) development.

The language of the model does, at times take on a didactic (even dogmatic) tone. In writing out the principles I was conscious of my dual role as researcher and teacher of staff development. Resolving the tensions between requests from staff to "tell us what works" and making tentative suggestions based on the data and what *might* work, was

not easy and the classroom voice shouted louder. So, at times my language is a response to the need for certainty. The conviction with which some points are made is no less than that of some authoritative researchers who have been quoted throughout this text. These strategies have all been tested in my classroom. The students' success is partial proof of their effectiveness. However, this is not to say that they will be successful in all contexts. If the initial principle is accepted and the lecturer decides that it may suit her style, subject and students, then the information that follows has legitimacy.

Getting to know how students think and learn.
This can be done by screening tests for learning styles on entry. This information can be used by the lecturer so that teaching is geared to the individuals. It also puts learning on the agenda. By making the students aware that there are many ways of learning which are context specific and that they are individual, it can be assumed that students will start reflecting on their learning behaviour and thus increase their metacognition.

There could be a ritual which questioned at least once in every class session, how the students had learned something and what aspects of the class were helpful/not helpful. This ritual reflection is probably most useful at the end of the class but it may be that attention spans have spun at this point.

A way of tying learning at college with learning in practice is to begin each session after practical placement with a review session – storytelling, if you like. This provides the teacher with valuable examples from the world of work and gives the student a time to think about the practical aspects in a less hectic context. The lecturer's job here is to extrapolate learning from the experiential telling.

Another way to understand how students learn is to regularly review how people are learning in the context of what they are learning. Giving them an understanding of metacognition "*finding (their) own way*" (Kirsty) of learning, by asking these questions in individual feedback, models a way of asking these pertinent questions. Independent learning is as dependent on the knowledge of how to learn as it is on the confidence that the student has on his/her ability to do it on their own.

Supporting students in becoming self-directed

Supporting students in this critical maturation process can be done in several ways. It can start in the classroom with very small scale "research" using limited amounts of written material. This can then be extended to more public areas like the library and then on to community libraries and then to more primary research in the form of questionnaires and interviews. Bringing the findings back to the classroom for discussion enables the students to exchange stories of the process, people's reactions and accessing information. Apart from teaching basic research skills, it gives them an opportunity to take learning outside the comfort zone without the lecturer and may be the beginning of building bridging capital. These contribute to taking responsibility for their own learning.

Another way to encourage self-direction is to allow them to determine areas of interest and assignment titles. Here again, the process needs to be graded, beginning with hunches and "small" questions which are particular to them; sometimes it amounts to a question that could be answered in the workplace. This requires minute planning because it needs to be followed up.

Building up networks in the classroom

To increase communality in learning, opportunities to strengthen systems within the group could be built into activities like discussion and project work. This can be done by students exchanging skills through sessions on learning styles. Group activity work and group discussion are essential for this construction of ties. Group engineering may have to be done initially so that people don't restrict their knowledge to their social comfort zone. Lecturers' knowledge of students' practice may be helpful to increase the confidence to share knowledge. To overcome self-effacing attitudes to ability allow opportunities for students to exchange experiences. The lecturer is part of the network. Recounting your experiences lets them know what you have learned from them. There is always a story. Showing how the elements of classroom networks can be transferred to making networks outside the college gives them an understanding of social capital and its benefits.

Learning partnerships that foster increased disposition to learn

By matching strengths and weaknesses partnerships between students can be fostered. Thinking and processing requires time and space. If all the tuition time is filled up with delivery of information and no time is left for "sifting" and musing, the students may become "*switched off*"(Sandra). Not every action has to be seen in the light of its utility. Leaving time at the beginning and end of each class for the students to have some "idle chat" is very useful for group cohesion. Being part of a group which enjoys learning means that to comply with the norm, you become a better learner. Once the group appears to have some bonding capital discuss reciprocity in terms of what each student has to give and "trade". (Some of the terms of social capital may not sit well in a classroom: they are other words which express the same characteristics in a more humanist way.) Once the student feels part of the group or at least, can trust some members of the group and has some knowledge of the strengths of each member, they can form these partnerships on their own.

Creating a culture for your classroom

The students in this study used the words "*guide*" and "*leader*" for the tutor. Each classroom can have its own culture led by the tutor. Students require a blend of predictability and surprise in classroom events. From my observation throughout the college, the successful classrooms were ones where the tutors had put their "stamp" on what happened. This is not to say they issued instructions and the students followed, although that was a type of stamp, but that each lecturer had a style that they communicated to the student. Reflective practice, regular and with colleagues, is useful for deciding what type of teacher you think is most effective in your classroom.

Building up a classroom culture which espouses social capital, fosters trust between students and an understanding within a shared community of practice. While it is important to build up vertical bonds between tutor and students it is equally important to support horizontal ties between peers. These horizontal ties are more effective for collective action (Field 2003) and they are the ones that remain when the students have left college. Groups with trustworthiness are able to accomplish more because they work on the understanding that obligations will be repaid (Coleman 1988).

Making the ethos explicit and organic lets the students contribute to the moulding of this culture. Encourage them to take on the trappings (language, clothing, professional demeanour, tradition) of the vocational calling. They need to see themselves as professionals.

Telling stories was my way of creating a culture. Storytelling ties learning to life; it situates the narrator as the major player and confirms their ability to link ideas to living. The story may not always appear "relevant". It may be that the lecturer's (or other class members) task is to find its relevance by adopting a more expansive understanding of this term.

Creating egalitarian structures

Constant vigilance is required that everyone is making a contribution to the learning pool and that this is acknowledged. Constructing questions so that they can be answered at all levels and scaffolding question and answer sessions at an appropriate pace allows everyone to participate. Some students may be able to cope with more adversarial interaction than others. *Why* can be a very intimidating question, depending on the context. If you make your teaching techniques explicit and show your students how to scaffold with each other, then they will be able to support each other. Tutoring them in observation skills and ways of explaining to others also helps with collaborative study. Whether they are doing an academic or a practical subject, explanation of an idea (conceptual) and the process of turning wood (concrete) require similar cognitive, linguistic and social skills. The idea is to support them to take over their own learning.

Sharing and accessing each other's knowledge may be a product of having failed in school and feeling generous to others similarly labelled. Not all groups may have this. This sharing may have to be nurtured. Again, collaborative working and feeding back to make the knowledge accessible to all may be one way of fostering this communality.

Encouraging them to make choices

Giving them wide, open-ended topics to think about, write about and research and building in lots of decision-making processes enables students to determine their own boundaries. Finding out what was behind their choices (simple and complex ones)

involves them in the learning process, may increase their confidence and encourages them to examine their thinking. Metacognition surfaces again.

Supporting them in risk-taking

This is difficult as risk-taking is often concomitant with confidence. Taking risks, seeing learning as mistakes and seeing learning as conditional can all be encouraged where the lecturer is clear and open about when evaluation is being used. "Giving it a go" can only be entertained when assessments are out of sight.

> Using trial and error assists students in seeing mistakes as part of learning (Dweck 2000). Once students have gained some confidence, feedback sessions on what went wrong are useful. Praise and encouragement for effort (rather than just for achievement) may foster a culture where students are more open to "giving it a go" rather than giving up the task for fear of failure and loss of face. Mastering the task is important for learning and building up confidence: if it's easy, the amount of learning is probably minimal. Showing them that intelligence can be developed and that we are not born with a fixed amount, may change attitudes of helplessness for those who have had unsuccessful school careers.

The conditionality of some knowledge

The concept of presenting knowledge as conditional is some cases presents more of a classroom attitude than it does a cognitive rule. By saying that some (learning is about knowing how to discern which is and which isn't) knowledge may be negotiable, the lecturer is laying down the ground rules of the epistemological approach. The point of this approach is to make more flexible thinkers. The danger may be that the students question the authority of the lecturer's expertise so it is important that this negotiability of knowledge does not come across as general uncertainty. The presentation of uncertainty must be certain.

Dialogue and discussion

To make discussion fruitful and less teacher-directed, the tutor can switch identities by being the student or absenting themselves for short periods of time. Response to comments should be less evaluative and more about making connections and in the case of more confident students, asking for justification and posing counter arguments. In

discussion the students may take on different masks, some more authoritative than others. "Speaking as a mother…" may have more authority than "speaking as a student worker…" depending on the context. Speaker roles can be made explicit by asking where their knowledge comes from. Getting them to define the origins of their perspective, using their "transportable identity" (Richards 2006: 61) to look at perspectives through the eyes of the other identities they possess within discourse, also substantiates the "conditional" ethos of the classroom. It illustrates that "truth" has perspectives.

> The use of metaphors helps to explain fundamental principles, abstract ideas and to "concretise" theory. However, when giving direction and instruction, the language should be clear and precise. The amount of direction depends on the level and stage of independent learning.

Using competency-based techniques

Outlining the outcomes and the assessment expectations lets the students know what they are working towards. This transparency may contribute to the students' confidence in at least two ways: the apparent straightforwardness of outcomes gives them something concrete to hold onto; it can provide a structure for what can sometimes seem a boundary-less accumulation of material. This may appear to contradict the above statement on conditionality but learning to relate to concepts and information with ambiguity and uncertainty comes later when the students have the confidence to deal with it.

Conclusion

Research issues: theories tested

The thesis set out to examine the learning of a group of HN students on one course in one college with a view to providing a model for effective learning. It discovered that learning for them was above all a social activity which had aspects of communality. The students confirmed Bruner's theory that sharing in a common culture enhances learning and went further to say that the norms of this particular classroom, which were trust and reciprocity, encouraged discourse and a positive learning identity. It affirmed Bruner's theory about testing hunches (see Chapter 1, page 11 for full quotation) and how intellectual inquiry is set in motion by individual, emotional, and intuitive responses. It

showed how, by allowing the free expression of this "hunch" and exposing it to critical thought, the learning approach in this particular classroom fostered the students' ability to increase their disposition to learn.

The above principles are not intended as a "learnable tool-kit" (Claxton 1996: 55); the thesis shows that these "tips for teacher" and any similar shortcuts for the learning process are illusory. What these principles attempt to do is to capture a glimpse of how we want to present ourselves as teachers and what kind of student identity our learners wish for. It shows how learning changes the self, leaving a legacy of shared communal learning and a "compass" (Field 2000: 51) to find a pathway to lifelong learning. Given the complexity of the classroom dynamics and the students' learning biographies, it is simplistic to offer a "tool-kit" approach to staff development programmes. It may be that FE teachers will need to look at a way of devising their own classroom based research in both practical and person-centred disciplines.

At times the difference between teaching and learning is as simple as who is standing up and who is sitting down. If *"teaching has to be movement and louder than sitting in a chair"* and *"the journey to the decision is important"* (Patricia and Davina) then it means that the interactive nature depends on the subject, the students, the teacher and the dynamics whereby learning is constructed through the eyes of others *that matter.* If the students in my study were taught within school structures that locked them into a way of thinking and seeing themselves, they were set free to think independently by supportive structures within the learning community at college. Part of that release was dependent on peers, teachers and workplace staff. If the *"subject is the teacher"* (Roslyn C.), there was also a symbiosis occurring between knowledge, their understanding and classroom relationships.

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Appendix A

Letters and Questionnaire

Dear Participant

This questionnaire and possible subsequent interview is part of a research PhD I am doing at the University of Glasgow in the Educational Studies department. As explained at the top of the interview form the study is concerned with the learning experience at college, specifically what factors affect students who have few previous qualifications. The questionnaire should take approximately 5 minutes to fill in and the interview about 30 minutes. Questionnaires have been sent to all students on the HNSLN course from 1995-2002. As you have all passed your course this will in no way affect any assessment outcomes, nor will any disclosures affect references for employment. All information will be treated with respect and in confidence. Confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal requirements.

Should you wish at any time to withdraw permission to use your comments and name, please contact me on 01475724433 ext 2422 and I will be happy to destroy the data. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research project please contact: Professor Rex Whitehead, Ethics Officer, Centre for Science Education, Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow.

Your comments are essential to the success of my research and I appreciate your support with my studies.

Yours truly

Vicki (Coalter)

Date as postmark

Dear _____

I am doing a piece of research on the learning experience and would like to know your views. I would really appreciate you taking a few minutes to fill out the short questionnaire. If you are interested and would be willing to participate in an interview, please indicate by signing the last page. If your address and/or phone number have changed, please let me know. Many thanks for your co-operation. A prepaid envelope has been enclosed for your convenience.

Best wishes

Vicki Coalter

Lecturer

Special Education & Training

This is a questionnaire based on a study about success at College.

Many thanks for agreeing to take part.

Vicki Coalter

Questionnaire

Name _____

Award achieved at college (please circle)

        NC   HNC   HND

Year achieved:

Qualifications gained previously:
(state number)

                               number

'O' grade (or equivalent)   _____

Higher* grade (or equivalent)   _____

*grades A-C

For office use
1
2
3
4

What do you consider to be the 3 most important factors in enabling you to succeed at college?

(Please number them 1 – 3 with 1 being the most important)

support from peers
support from staff
teaching methods
resources
assessments
practical placement
lecture content
personal organisation
life experience
increase in self-confidence

other:

please specify _____

How was the learning experience at college different from that at school?

Name   _____

Address   _____

                          _____

                          _____

Phone #   _____

I would be willing to be interviewed on my educational experience.

Signed   _____

Appendix B

Data from questions 1 and 2 of the questionnaire

Questionnaire
Question 1: What do you consider the 3 most important factors in enabling you to succeed at College?

Factors	Highers (41 respondents)					Non-Highers (54 respondents)				
	1	**2**	**3**	**Aggregate**	**%**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**Aggregate**	**%**
Teaching methods	9	10	7	26	63	14	7	2	23	43
Practical Placement	5	7	9	21	51	1	8	9	18	33
Support from staff	9	7	3	19	46	15	15	5	35	65
Lecture content	4	4	5	13	32	6	6	4	16	30
Support from peers	6	2	2	10	24	7	5	4	16	30
Resources	0	4	6	10	24	0	0	5	5	9
Increase in self confidence	1	2	6	9	22	3	3	8	14	26
Personal organisation	4	2	1	7	17	6	3	6	15	28
Assessment	2	1	1	4	10	0	2	2	4	7
Life experience	1	2	1	4	10	2	6	8	16	30
Other: Please specify Motivation (2) Support from family New ideas on technology				**123**					**162**	

Question 1

What do you consider to be the 3 most important factors in enabling you to succeed at college?

HNSLN (95 respondents)		
support from staff	57%	(24 first choice)
teaching methods	52%	(23 first choice)
practical placement	41%	(6 first choice)
lecture content	32%	(10 first choice)
support from peers	27%	(13 first choice)
increase in self confidence	24%	(4 first choice)
personal organisation	23%	(10 first choice)
life experience	21%	(3 first choice)
resources	16%	(no first choices)
assessment	8%	(2 first choice)

Questionnaire: BSc Computing: (27 respondents)			
teaching methods	13	48%	(3 first choice)
resources	13	48%	(3 first choice)
support from staff	12	44%	(6 first choice)
lecture content	11	41%	(6 first choice)
increase in self confidence	8	30%	(1 first choice)
personal organisation	6	22%	(2 first choice)
assessments	6	22%	(0 first choice)
support from peers	5	19%	(1 first choice)
life experience	4	15%	(3 first choice)
practical placement *	2	7%	(1 first choice)

Questionnaire
Question 2: How was the learning experience at college different from that at school?

	HNSLN Highers	HNSLN Non-Highers	Aggregate	BSc Computing %
Suitable pace	1	0	1	
Student loan	-	-	-	1
Greater sense of achievement	1	0	1	
Life experience plus learning in college	0	1	1	
Active learning	1	1	2	
Time allowed	1	1	2	
More support	2	0	2	
Flexible and negotiable	0	3	3	
More encouragement, praise	0	4	4	
Real life experience	3	2	5	1
Increased confidence	0	6	6	2
Motivation, willingness to learn – attributed to maturity	2	5	7	2
Student centred – more involvement from students/group discussion	2	7	9	1
Relaxed, informal, laid back	0	9	9	9
Allowed to think independently, give options, develop own ideas	6	4	10	1
Recognised as an individual/more respect	5	6	11	0
Interest in subject, choice of curriculum	0	11	11	1
You were treated as an adult	5	8	13	3
Better relationship with lecturers, more approachable/supportive	7	7	14	5
In charge of / responsible for own learning	17	6	23	3

The aggregate numbers are higher than the number of respondents because most respondents gave more than one answer.

Appendix C

Interview Questions for Non-Highers Group

Interview: Non-Highers group

I am interested in the relationship between the learning experience at college, your definition of yourself in this process and how those factors relate to your success on your HN course.

Interview Questions

In the survey you listed as the 3 most important factors in succeeding at college as:

1   Can you tell me a bit more about that?

2   You also stated that the learning experience was different from school in that

        _____

        Can you say a bit more about how that aspect may have helped you to succeed?

3   At what age and why did you decide to come back to college?

4   What made you think you could succeed?

5   What does being a student mean to your definition of yourself?

6   Did you see learning as a "communal activity" (Bruner)

7   If so, how was it communal and what did you share with the group?

8   If the quality of teaching had an effect on your learning experience, can you explain   how?

9   How did the incremental nature of the course (NC, then HNC & D and then 3rd year   of university) affect your attitude to your studies?

10   Anything to add, questions to ask?

Permission to use quotes   yes/no
Permission to attribute quotes to real name   yes/no

Appendix D

Interview Questions for Highers Group

Interview: Highers group

1   In the survey you listed as the 3 most important factors in succeeding at college
as

        1, 2, 3.

        Can you tell me a bit more about that?

2   You also stated that the learning experience was different from school in that

        _____

        Can you say a bit more about how that aspect may have helped you to succeed?

3   (If "responsible for own learning" was not given as answer to question two.)

        Do you think being responsible for your own learning has any effect on your
experience at college?

4   Anything to add, questions to ask?

Permission to use quotes   yes/no
Permission to attribute quotes to real name   yes/no

Appendix E

Letters to case-studies

Letters to case studies

Dear Elaine, John, Roslyn,

I hope your job is going well. I know you are busy but I would really appreciate your comments on the case study I have written up for you. This is a small biopic from what I know of you and also what you said in the interview on your learning experience at college.

Would you mind reading it over and expand, confirm, deny, add anything that you think is missing or would be relevant and then return it to me in the envelope provided please? Any extra biographical details would also be useful. I have used your comments elsewhere and since you are one of the three students who went from NC to BA, I want to add your story as a separate section to give a more human picture to the whole study.

Finally, ethical considerations are very important in research. At the time of interview you gave permission to use your real name and to quote from the notes. If this permission still holds with the case study could you please sign the slip enclosed and return it with your additional comments?

I really appreciate you taking the time to do this. If you want to talk it over please don't hesitate to call me on xxxxxxx (emailxxxxx).
Thanks again; looking forward to hearing from you.

Vicki

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PhD Research
University of Glasgow
Vicki Coalter

I give permission to use my real name and to quote my comments in your research.

Signature ………………………………………………………… Date …………………

Sample Sources of Evidence

Basis for selection

Interview notes from five interviews are included in the appendices. There are also two completed questionnaires and notes from the second interview of one of the case-studies, John.

The five interviewees were chosen on the basis of the usefulness of the data. They were some of the more "quotable" students, already mentioned in the study. They were also some of the longer interviews and all were face-to-face. Four of the five interviewees had no Highers and one had Highers and therefore answered the shorter interview designed for that more qualified group.

The questionnaires were chosen for similar reasons and because they were examples of the only meaningful differences found between the two groups. They also represented a school leaver with Highers and an adult returner with no Highers.

The case studies

I have included Rosyln's first interview as authentication and John's second interview because he was the only one of the case studies who came in for a second interview. These notes are more stream of conscousness since this was a very unstructured interview and could almost be classed as a monologue.

Appendix F

Completed questionnaires (2)

Appendix G

Completed interviews (2)

Appendix H

Roslyn's first interview and John's second interview notes