

Inside Further Education: the social context of learning

This qualitative study, called Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales, explored students' and teachers' lives, with a focus on their interactions in classrooms and other sites of learning. Its purpose was to explore what students and their teachers brought to the classroom, such as their prior experiences and their dispositions towards and expectations of learning. This gave insights into the complex nature of students' lives, and how learning styles and outcomes were a negotiated outcome of the interactions.

- Faced with endless change, teachers feel under pressure from college managers and from external monitoring to ensure that their students remain on courses and attain qualifications. → Managers and policy makers need to acknowledge that endless change and the pressure for performativity destabilises teachers' work, and intensifies their workload.
- Some students have had negative prior experiences as learners, especially in school, often leading to negative learner identities. Not all are equipped with the knowledge and skills for learning. → The role of further education is often ameliorative and compensatory. More attention needs to be given to the transition and entry into further education and to the acquisition of basic and learning skills.
- Students' complex social lives are brought into the classroom and being a student is fitted into a wider life, which affects participation and engagement in learning. → Policy makers need to recognise the often-neglected supportive aspect of teachers' work and help to 'scaffold' learners endeavours, particularly through financial support.
- Coping with pressure and accommodating students' wider lives undermines and restructures teachers' professionalism, professional identities and classroom practices. → Learning is a negotiated response to what teachers and students bring to the classroom, and how these interact. More recognition and support should be given to the individualised and often one-to-one learning that takes place.

The research

Much is expected of the further education sector and of those who work and learn in it. In recent policy documents further education is constructed as a means to bring about social cohesion and economic prosperity by equipping people with the skills and knowledge needed for the labour market.

Little is known, however, about what goes on inside FE colleges and classrooms, the ways that teachers go about their work or the ways in which learners engage in their studies. A primary purpose of this study was to provide a contemporary account of learning and working in further education by tracking a group of teachers and students over a two-year period. The project involved looking into the working lives and professional identities of teachers and following the 'learning journeys' of students. We did not see these two groups in isolation from each other but were interested in how they interacted, both students with students and students with teachers. Moreover, we were not just interested in what went on inside colleges but also in how being a teacher or being a student intersected with what we called 'wider lives', that is, with the social, cultural, economic and political environments in which people live. Our interest in the changing political context of further education was especially pertinent because of the devolution to Wales and the resulting possibilities for divergent policies and practices.

The research design sought to address a number of empirical research questions:

- What is the nature of the social interaction between students and teachers in FE settings and how does it create diverse learning outcomes?
- What kinds of learning outcomes are produced for students and staff in FE settings?
- How do the internal characteristics of the settings in which learning takes place influence the interaction between teachers and students?
- How are the learner identities of students shaped by the wider economic, social and cultural environment and how are learning processes influenced by these identities?
- How do teachers in FE construct their professional practice and how are learning processes affected by these dispositions?
- In what ways are learning processes in FE influenced by the distinctive policy regime of Wales?

Methods

The research was conducted over a two year period in three further education colleges, spread across seven campuses in South Wales. The study focused on learners in full-time academic courses (mainly 16- to 19-year-old A-level students); full-time vocational courses (mainly 16- to 19-year-olds and some older returners to learning); and part-time vocational courses (mainly older learners). By negotiation with each college, we identified a group of at least nine teachers and 15 students, spread across the three types of course. These 27 teachers and 45 students comprised the 'core participants' of the study.

There were four principal methods of data collection. Semi-structured in-depth interviews took place with the core participants at the beginning and end of the two year period. Learning journals were completed by core participants at regular intervals, and were designed to elicit data on the experiences of learning and teaching. Focus group interviews were undertaken towards the end of the first year of the study and towards its end, designed to explore with a much larger group of students some of the issues arising from other data sources. Finally, ethnographic-type observation was carried out with a focus on the nature of social interaction in different learning settings.

Findings

Regulation and accountability

Teachers constantly told us of the pressure they were under. Many were critical of initiatives such as attempts to impose learning styles inventories on which teachers were expected to act in classrooms. Many described their working lives as being 'driven by the numeric data', with middle managers regularly having to undertake 'curriculum area audits by subject'. Some felt strongly that 'grappling with the data' prevented them from preparing for teaching. Most thought that national policy detracted from what they saw as their core roles in teaching and supporting students. Inspection by Estyn, the Welsh education and training monitor, changes in the qualification framework and the embedding of the Welsh baccalaureate were but a few of the challenges listed by our teachers.

Schooling and transitions into further education

Students' prior experiences of education and especially of schooling were often negative. Carried into further education, they were used to explain and justify current dispositions to learning. Many teachers perceived further education as the 'last chance saloon' and saw much of its role as ameliorative and compensatory.

Though some students praised the schools they had attended, they were far fewer than the critical ones and were far less strongly expressed. Virtually all interviewees claimed that further education gave learners more time and more individualised help and that schools had failed large numbers of pupils because of their inability to tailor appropriately to their needs.

Complex lives

Most students saw coming to college as important but they also regarded it as only a part of their lives. As life became more complex and demanding, it was often learning that paid the price. Students adopted a range of coping strategies, many looking to contain their studies within the college day so that at other times they could attend to other matters in their lives. Some younger students did little or no study out of college time, and struggled to balance college work with the demands of their wider social lives. There was a gap between their often high expectations of the gains from attending college and the work they did to accomplish them. Some so-called full-time students worked over 30 hours a week in 'part-time' jobs.

These competing pressures were illustrated in class by interruptions from mobile phones and texts relaying, for example, the heart attack of a student's mother and on another occasion an absent class mate's positive pregnancy test. In turn, teachers were acutely aware of both the need to strive for improving students' results and to cater for and scaffold the wider realities of their learners' lives. Several teachers described relationships in which students revealed a great deal to them, accepting this as part of their job, intervening, offering help, sometimes bringing in the counselling service or arranging medical referrals.

Emotional labour

Teachers invested heavily in emotional labour as a form of coping strategy to deal with the pressure and stresses they faced from college managers and especially from a growing number of 'challenging' and 'reluctant' learners. In their dealings with these students and to diffuse difficult classroom situations, teachers displayed tolerance, often feigned amusement and acted in ways which belied their real feelings. The emotional struggles and range of emotions they experienced provided evidence of the complex relationship of teaching and caring: irritation and frustration with students who arrived late, who were ill equipped, had not brought in their coursework or missed submission dates; joy at how individuals responded to encouragement and demonstrated progress.

The majority of teachers worked with students well beyond the allotted course timetabled hours. Extensive use of one-on-one teaching within

timetabled classes and beyond them occurred in all sites. Teachers established nurturing relationships, chased up missing students via texts and phone calls and generally felt that the emotional labour they undertook, although draining, was part of being an FE professional.

'Wider benefits of learning'

Belief in the transformative capacity of further education and the power of qualifications to enhance an individual's labour market position, increase earnings, raise standards of living and quality of life was widely held at all the campuses we studied. However, being in post-compulsory education and training contributed to much more than the acquisition of qualifications. While the need for students to obtain accredited qualifications drove much of the learning and teaching, the majority of teachers and many students attached more importance to other outcomes. Throughout the study and in their final interviews, younger learners often pointed to the social dimension of being a student. Without exception, all student accounts revealed a positive perception that studying at college could change and improve their lives.

The 'learning journey'

'Learning journeys' are not neat, linear or unproblematic. They contain unpredictability, susceptibility to external pressures and tension.

The learning journeys that students embarked on had their own antecedents and were rooted in disparate experiences of schooling. At relatively young ages, learners led and managed complex private lives. Learning journeys do not start or end at common points. They have a range of characters and destinations. Despite following and engaging with learners over the length of their college courses, we could not put them in categories which account for their learning outcomes. Some students explain their lack of academic progress with reference to the pressures in their wider lives, while others with more 'successful' trajectories use the same pressures to explain their determination to succeed.

Negotiated learning

Learning is in part a product of the social interactions of learners and teachers. Prior knowledge and prior experiences of learning and teaching, together with wider life-experiences collide in unique and individual ways.

Our research points to ways in which learners and teachers resolve the challenges caused by this collision and to a wider definition of learning outcomes. Classroom teachers commonly told us that they felt under pressure from college managers to retain students, to ensure good examination results or 'do paperwork'. But on a day-to-day basis they were

Major implications

Learner identities

Contrary to some conceptualisations, we argue that the conditions under which individuals participate in further education are central to learning processes and, to some extent, learning outcomes. Students bring learner identities to their learning settings which reflect their previous educational and professional experiences, as well as their wider social circumstances. To this extent, learning is 'situated.' The connections between what happens inside and outside the learning setting are stronger than has been suggested in much previous research.

Teacher identities

Teachers have professional identities which emphasise further education's role in compensating for previous educational disadvantage, and the teachers' primary responsibilities for the social well-being of their students. This role is seen to be under threat from growing bureaucracy and from the demands of an increasingly managerialist regime in colleges. These competing pressures are reconciled by a renewed emphasis on an ethic of care and an essentially moral commitment to the teacher's role in ameliorating the social disadvantages experienced by many students, especially in areas such as South Wales.

Patterns of interaction

Learning interactions in FE colleges constitute what we term 'negotiated regimes of learning'. Students are highly proactive in shaping these regimes, so that the pedagogical strategies of the teachers and the college more widely are often subverted. Social interaction within learning settings can often appear disorganised or even chaotic.

Nevertheless, students report that they achieve positive learning outcomes, in terms of both formal attainment and wider social development. This seeming paradox can be reconciled, at least in part, by reference to the underpinning social practices that are characteristic of the interaction between students and teachers.

Realizing expectations

Given that so many students do not possess the levels of basic skills, subject knowledge or learning skills needed to succeed in further education, many would benefit from more support in their transition and entry into further education. In particular, they need to develop a better sense of their desired future and the means to achieve it. Moreover, consideration should be given to funding further education students, alleviating the need for them to engage in part-time work, thus enabling them to focus more time on improving their skills and knowledge.

Learning outcomes

Students in further education are often more 'challenging', more demanding and in some cases more 'reluctant to learn' than those in school or higher education. This places demands on teachers and managers that are not fully appreciated in the wider population and to a lack of appreciation and recognition of what is achieved in FE. The current emphasis on formal education, the skills agenda and the need for qualifications although important, should recognise that teachers and students exist in a wider social context. Recognition and support must be given to the individualised nature of learning in further education rather than to the learning inventory approach.

more concerned about supporting students and dealing with the growing number of reluctant learners. Many students told us about their financial difficulties, the long hours worked in 'part-time' paid employment to support their studies and, in many cases, how they had fallen behind in their studies and especially with meeting coursework hand-in dates. These dilemmas needed

resolution, which to a degree took place through interactions in the classroom. These interactions and the learning outcomes are not predetermined, but are contingent on what the teachers and students brought into the classroom and negotiated in the different sites where these interactions take place.



Figure 1: Individualised attention in different learning sites and settings

Further information

Published papers associated with the Learning and Working in Further Education project are:

Jephcote, M., Salisbury, J., (forthcoming, 2008), 'The Wider Social Context of Learning: beyond the classroom door', *International Journal of Learning*, Vol. 15.

Salisbury, J., Jephcote, M., and Roberts, J. (forthcoming, 2008), 'Further Education Teachers Talking about Students' Learning', accepted for publication in *Research Papers in Education*.

Jephcote, M., Salisbury, J., and Rees, G (2008), 'Being a teacher in further education in changing times', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 163-171.

Salisbury, J., and Jephcote, M. (2008) 'Initial Encounters of an FE Kind', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 149-162.

Jephcote, M., and Salisbury, J. (2007), 'The Long Shadow of Incorporation: the further education sector in devolved Wales', *The Welsh Journal of Education*, 14 (1), 100-116.

Rees, G (2007), 'The Impacts of Parliamentary Devolution on Education Policy in Wales', *The Welsh Journal of Education*, 14 (1), 8-20.

Rees, G. (2007) 'The Politics of Adult Learning: the view from 'Outer Britain'', *Adults Learning*, September 2007.

Jephcote, M., Rees, G., Salisbury, J., and Roberts, J. (2005) 'Pressure Grows as Wales Tackles Reforms', *Times Educational Supplement*, 18th May, 2005.

Project Working Papers 1 to 9 can be found at www.FurtherEducationResearch.org

Project website:

<http://www.FurtherEducationResearch.org>

Project contact:

Martin Jephcote
Cardiff School of Social Sciences,
Cardiff University,
King Edward VIIth Building,
Cardiff, CF10 3WT
Jephcote@cardiff.ac.uk
029 20 875333

Project team:

Martin Jephcote, Jane Salisbury, Gareth Rees, John Roberts

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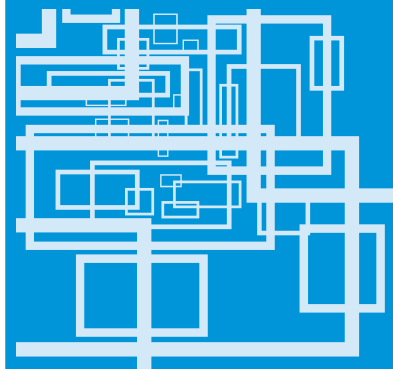
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The warrant

The empirical base for the Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales project derived from a multi-method qualitative approach, incorporating interviews, journal writing and ethnographic observation. There were 27 core teachers and 45 core students together with another 131 students who participated in focus groups, ranging across seven campuses. Engagement with the participants in the study – and, in particular, the teachers – has involved discussion of the progress of the project during its unfolding. These participants have not been passive objects of research, but have contributed actively to its development. Even after some non-completion and attrition, our approach produced a rich source of information comprising interviews and journals from students and teachers, and field notes and analytic themes from about 65 days of ethnographic observation. These different sources of information have been subjected to thematic analysis relating to the research questions, yielding a stream of rich data.

It is recognised, however, that the relatively small scale of the study raises some questions about the generalisability of the findings. This is typical of qualitative studies. We suggest that the in-depth nature of the data produced has provided significant insights into the social processes underpinning interaction in learning settings and learning outcomes. These have implications beyond the specific settings in which they were developed and would not be easily obtained by other methods. The general findings resonate with findings from other research into further education and also with that of the social worlds of primary school and higher education students. At the same time, the findings offer insights into the lived realities of further education and demand more attention, especially from policy communities.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves some 90 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and the Technology Enhanced Learning phase will continue to 2012.

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TLRP Directors' Team

Professor Andrew Pollard | London
Professor Richard Noss | London
Professor Miriam David | London
Professor Alan Brown | Warwick
Professor Mary James | London

TLRP Programme Office

Sarah Douglas | sarah.douglas@ioe.ac.uk
James O'Toole | j.o'toole@ioe.ac.uk
tlrp@ioe.ac.uk

TLRP

Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL
UK

Tel +44 (0)20 7911 5577

