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The Learning Journey: adults’ experiences of further education

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Abstract

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We have argued that what is learnt and how learning takes place is, in part, a product of the social interactions of learners and teachers. Learning is shaped, facilitated and constrained by, on the one hand, what learners and teachers bring to this interaction and on the other, the nature of the interaction. Thus, prior knowledge and prior experiences of learning (and teaching) together with wider life-experiences ‘collide’ in the classroom and other sites of learning in ways which, at the time, are unique and individual, but also characteristic of learning in further education settings. Our research strongly points to the ways in which learners and teachers resolve the challenges caused by this collision and, in turn, to a wider definition of learning outcomes.

In relation to the above, this paper draws on a variety of data collected as part of an ESRC/TLRP ‘Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales’ research project. In this project we have tracked the learning journeys of students and teachers over a two-year period utilising in-depth individual student and teacher interviews, focus group student interviews, regular structured learning journals and extensive in-depth ethnographic fieldwork. The metaphor of a learning journey is employed as the basis of an early conceptual framework but, as we go on to discuss, it is problematic and restrictive.

Ongoing analysis of our qualitative data confirms that the learning journeys upon which students embark, have their own antecedents rooted in for example, disparate experiences of schooling, employment and parenthood and that many learners lead and manage complex private lives. This points to the almost self-evident fact that ‘learning journeys’ do not start or end at common points and, crucially, the nature of the ‘journeys’ are not only different but also impact on the ‘destination’.

Coming to college is seen by both young and older learners as an important part of their lives. It is of course, only a part of their lives, so that managing lives includes managing learning and often, as an individual’s situation becomes complex and demanding, it is ‘learning’ that is often the casualty. Students adopt a range of coping strategies; many try to contain their studies within the timeframe of the college day, others study when their children are asleep or partners out of sight. Thus at other times they can attend to matters arising in their wider lives. In turn, teachers are acutely aware of, on the one-hand, the need to strive for academic results and, on the other, the need to cater for and accommodate the wider realities of their students’ lives.

Our conclusion does not offer a neat set of solutions. We recognise that the complex and individual nature of ‘learning journeys’ and the ‘collision’ of experiences that underpin learning calls for a more nuanced response. Although we have found the metaphor of a ‘learning journey’ helpful it is also problematic in the ways in which it oversimplifies and suggests a neat, somewhat linear passage which fails to capture the full complexity of students’ learning encounters inside and without the college classroom.
Introduction

This paper arises from the ongoing work of a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). Entitled Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales, the research began in 2005 and is exploring the relationships between students’ learning journeys and teachers’ working lives in ten programme areas, on seven campuses in South Wales. There have been up to two semi-structured interviews with 27 teachers and 49 students, up to seven Learning Journals have been received from every teacher and student, and there has been extensive observation of the learning settings in which the selected teachers work with the selected students. In order to test the findings from the main student sample nine focus groups of students have taken place in the colleges.

This paper focuses on a sub-set of learners in the study who can be described as ‘adults’, according to definitions based on age (they are over 16 and not in full-time education) and/or the fact that they are ‘second chance’ learners who are resuming formal education after a break. The paper will draw upon data from all of the sources mentioned in order to explore the detail of the lives and learning journeys of adult learners. First, the regional and institutional settings will be described and some themes will be introduced. A focus group discussion will then be analysed in order to draw out a number of key aspects of adult learners’ ‘Journeys’, and these aspects will be explored in more detail through the experiences of two learners, selected from the main student sample.

The institutional settings, further education (FE) colleges, in Wales as elsewhere in the UK, are important spaces for learners of all abilities and ages to study a subject, course or set of skills for their intrinsic interest, or for a qualification. Increasingly they are seen by policy makers as a means to overcome social inequality and to support economic growth and competition. Policy rhetoric links them, increasingly, to the importance of their place in the ‘learning age’ and to the need for the Wales itself to compete in the global economy. Students present themselves at an FE college for a variety of reasons and with diverse motivational accounts, and a range of different enrolment types exist such as full time, part time, day release from work schemes and flexi-study. Notably, the uniqueness of FE’s role has been described by Kennedy:

It is further education which has invariably given second chances to those who were forced by necessity to make unfulfilling choices. It said ‘try again’ to those who had been labelled as failures and who had decided education was not for the likes of them. (Kennedy, 1999: 3)

The Welsh context also has specific characteristics. Following devolution in 1999 it have been claims that there is ‘clear red water’ between the goals and policies of Cardiff and London, while some distinctive polices have been described by the former Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning as ‘made in Wales’ policies (Davidson 2004). Nevertheless, while differences between them are more evident, the goals and policies of UK governments in relation to adult learning and further education show a good deal of similarity, not least in their reflection of the imperatives of globalisation through adherence to the Lisbon Strategy. An emphasis on lifelong learning runs through key Assembly publications (WAG; 2001 and 2004). In this respect, the 2006 Learning and Labour Market Intelligence for Wales national and regional reports (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006) provide information relevant to the learning agenda in Wales. Taken together, they illustrate well the complexity of Wales as a distinct economic region and the sub-regional disparities and we plan to say more about this.
Preliminary themes

Listening to the voices of learners, in particular those of Hayley and Matt, that follow, provides an opportunity and an empirical framework within which to take up several themes that have been prominent in the discourses on adults in education and lifelong learning in recent years. These themes will be summarised briefly as a conceptual background, and subsequently will be interrogated in the light of the learners’ voices, which will follow.

Complexity. While it is axiomatic to say that learners’ life-worlds are complex, it is valuable to be reminded not only of the very large set of influences that are interrelated in the way they affect learners’ lives but how the complex and intricate interplay and interrelatedness can work. An appreciation of the denseness of this complexity shows up the limitations of the notions of ‘barriers’ to participation and learning that were developed extensively, and conceptualised to include, for example, situational and dispositional barriers (McGivney, 1990).

Learner identity. Identity is dynamic not only in a temporal sense, because it changes over time, as the metaphors above denote, but dynamic because it is a multiple construct formed by the personal, history, and place, linked to roles and situations. Identity also is compounded with disposition to learn, motivation and aspiration.

Structure and agency. Attention is paid to the interplay between the public policies and problems and the private lives and decisions, as private stories are written in conditions determined by structures. Individual narratives reveal how structural forces operate and also how aspects of structure may be influenced by learners.

Learners as constructed in policy. The idealised learner of policy contrasts with the rich and varied individuals uncovered by ethnography. It might be inevitable that governments place their emphasis on economic performance, but the importance of super-complexity in learners’ lives is not sufficiently understood or reflected in national policies of lifelong learning linked to the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 (Brine, 2006) nor in the discourse of the responsible learner (Webb and Warren, 2007). Also, at a meta-level, UK governments are preoccupied with aggregated performance standards and their improvement, and a mantra of: ‘recruitment, retention, results’ prevails in further education.

Effective pedagogy. In further education in the UK attention to the quality of teaching in FE is a relatively recent matter (Harkin, 2005) while Coffield et al (2004: 47) have referred to learning and teaching practice in further education lacking an ‘explicit, coherent and agreed theory of pedagogy’ and Salisbury et al (2005) reported that FE teachers did not readily draw on established bodies of knowledge of learning and teaching when discussing their own approaches to practice.

Outcomes. What weight should be placed on learning outcomes additional to formally prescribed ones? Schuller (2003) has proposed a triangle of wider benefits that embraces enhancement of human capital, social capital and personal identity.

The search for metaphors. The metaphors ‘learning journey’ and ‘learning career’ are constructs for seeing learning in context, acknowledging social and cultural influences and their impact on individual learner identity; they provide opportunities to explore the individual’s
relationship to their own learning (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Goodlad, 2007). However, ‘career’ misleadingly suggests a linear process while many learners ‘journeys’ are fractured, contorted ones, to the extent that the notion of ‘revolving doors’ has become commonly used as a representation of the frequent and abrupt changes of direction that learners display.

The themes identified here can be discerned in the glimpses of adult learners’ lives that are presented below.

**Focus group**

This group meeting with 7 students, which lasted for two hours, provided a rich survey of the realities of life as an adult, returning learner. Before discussing the interview we should note the context. The group members were on an Access to Nursing and Health Professions course in a further education college in a South Wales valley; all the group members have applied to local universities. The area is still blighted by the disappearance of heavy industry and coal mining, and has had relatively little direct benefit from the economic development further south around Cardiff and the M4 corridor. With high rates of economic inactivity, it is a focus of major regeneration efforts and drives to raise the qualification and skill levels of the population.

The importance of environmental, presage factors came out clearly when the group was invited to look back over earlier experiences, including their education, and there were numerous tales of constraints and disruptions in schooling arising from familial or structural influences. Sue Keane (31) had: *been brought up in an environment where girls are not really looked upon to go far in education.* Di Nissons (38), out of education for 22yrs, was twice divorced and had five children: *My parents were divorced. … I grew up in domestic violence, I experienced domestic violence … and it’s made me stronger and it’s made me want to go out and prove to the world - that I can do it.* Carrie Morris (27), who described herself as *always in trouble* as a child, had been a teenage mother who was not allowed to resume her studies: *I’ve just been determined right the way through that I’m going to finish this course no matter what.*

Almost without exception, like Carrie above, the students vehement about their determination to achieve, and saw their opportunity to study in FE in a focused and purposeful way that contrasted strongly with the low levels of engagement and commitment exhibited by younger students in our project. For example, X was a student whose preferred course not available to her; consequently, she was studying something she did not expect to use; despite this, she remained on the course.

*I would have rather do counselling studies or ethics or women’s studies as they used to do but I wasn’t given any option. … So I had to do biology and physical science when I’m never going to use them again but I had to do it …*

Becoming and being a student involved transitions and challenges. Sue described the course as a *rollercoaster* and for several students the middle period was like being stuck in a dark tunnel. For some learners a key challenge was coming to terms with the unfamiliar processes of assessment and the discouraging experience of referral grades on assignments. Molly Shears (20) expressed it like this:
Next day boom, bang, wrong, referred and it’s like – It seems to be a continuous thing. Every single lesson, every single thing you give in you’ve worked really hard, you’ve given in – referred. You do it again. ... you think oh I’ve put so much into it ... then that’s what really knocks your confidence.

By Christmas, Molly was very close to giving up, and her parents made clear that they would support her; however the strength of her dream kept her on the course:

But I want to see myself in ten years’ time living in that penthouse suite in America, married to a doctor with four children running round me. I want to see that, I want to be there, and I know if I don’t work that out I’m not going to get it.

One student spoke of her sense of a more profound threat, of a change in her identity and possible alienation from former friends: I’ve met certain people that have, erm, been and gone through university and I’ve like noticed a change in them. And I’m really scared because I don’t want to lose – You know, I don’t want to lose my past, do you know what I mean? I know where I’m from and I’m really proud of that. ... But I know, I understand there will be a change. There’s got to be hasn’t there otherwise you don’t progress. ... But do you also think that the people around you change as well towards you ... because you’re trying to progress and further yourself? Although you are not changing these people ... have changed around you because they’ve still stood ... whereas you have gone on to improve yourself.

The group members had many tales of finding that life influences conspired to thwart or interrupt their studies, and feeling that dice are stacked against them. A main part of their effort and struggle is about money; everyone in the group reports financial hardship, whatever their circumstances. None of the women who were divorced received maintenance payments from their former partners. Several Access learners receive £500, including coverage of travel costs. Nevertheless a number of the group still needed to work part-time, evenings and weekends, and they described the stresses and pressures on them resulting from this. Molly had 2 part-time jobs, and Elly Amos (33), a single mother, worked two night shifts each week, while Carrie Morris was married and received no grant because of her husband’s income, but:

I’m a care assistant (part-time) ... in the community I’m out from 7 o’clock in the morning until usually 9 o’clock in the evening, Saturday and Sunday. And I also do another course as well, an English course because in the beginning I struggled – struggled with grammar and things like that and the maths side of it. So I’ve done this course then as a little bit of support.

Sue Keane (31) and Molly were full-time students on the Access course. Sue has been ill and unable to work, and was conscious of the effects on her children, who: are noticing it... find it really hard this year. They can’t have this or they can’t go there. For Shelley the stress for was that her employment consumed vital study time, making her frustrated:

I work as a part-time customer assistant ... and I also work still on the NHS ... But I don’t get a grant because I still live at home with my parents and they take in their wages into account even though I’m 20 ... I’ve got my own things to worry about and it’s just not fair and I mean I do work. I work all weekends it’s seven days a week constantly for me, it’s not a day off. I don’t get the option to have a day off!

These learners were juggling college attendance, the demands of study and course work, paid employment and family responsibilities, displaying immense determination and tenacity. Like
Sue, above, they were not unaware of the costs, including the effects on others, including experiencing some alienation within the family, and other double-edged or negative effects of studying, for example having less time to devote to care and ‘service’ within the family. M said that she was: a bad mother at the moment because I don’t get to spend time with my daughter. I haven’t seen my mother for a fortnight ’cos I’m there every night on the laptop, you know. Rennie Ellis summed up the single-mindedness required to stick with the course despite the difficulties: I’m forgetting myself most of the time, becoming hard to myself. Sue spoke of a degree of family estrangement due to her changed circumstances: I’ve noticed I don’t see a lot of my family actually. Yeah, they definitely think I am having a midlife crisis. They look at me weirdly.

While unconditional support from wider family members was not universally available for all of the older students and some experienced little help, other older students did report support from both their neighbours and relatives living nearby, with mothers, sisters or even 19 year old daughters to collect their children from school and baby sit whilst they studied or did paid night or weekend shifts. In their turn college teachers and systems responded by straining to provide the support that would retain the students on the course and to foster constructive and nurturing responses and group relationships. Almost all students admitted to feelings of self-doubt about their abilities as well as personal difficulties relating to wider outside lives and situations.

Sue gave the example of the college’s reaction after her home had been burgled:

I was off for two weeks and I wasn’t going to come back full time. … it really, really upset me didn’t it? … and they phoned me up at home … asked me did I want to see the student counsellor … they were absolutely marvellous, … Really good and really supportive when I came back.

The importance of the support offered by the group to its members is also evident here: my fellow students as well, they’ve been marvellous, absolutely better than my family. In discussion about effective learning and teaching methods the focus group members strongly supported the use of discussion as a classroom methodology. They were equally emphatic about the value of informal discussion between themselves, something clearly seen to involve collaborating to translate, or decode, the subject-specific language (‘jargon’) into something comprehensible.

The group members had much to say about what they had gained from the course, and generally this involved increased self-awareness and self-belief. These are typical statements: a lot more faith in my own abilities … a lot more confident in what I can do …ready now to progress to the next level and looking forward to it whereas before I was dreading the thought of even applying to university… improved key skills with maths and English and things and sort of proving to yourself that nothing’s impossible. You can do anything you want to do. Sue made clear this increase in self-confidence is not inevitable and that the process of transition is complex: Mine’s going down whereas, you know, others seems to go up. … I was an auxiliary [nurse] … I felt really, you know, confident and competent in what I was doing … and I’ve come here and I feel a little bit out of water.

Two group members emphasised that their worlds had been enlarged; according to Elly Amos: … being a single mum, you know, there’s not many – not much opportunity to meet other people that are in a different mindset to what they tend to label us as.
Molly Shears was now impatient to go further: *I like the thought of meeting new people from different places, getting to know them. That's why university and college have always appealed to me. ... Can't wait to meet new people, get in there, get stuck in.*

**Two vignettes**

In these vignettes the learning lives of two students are summarised in more detail. They offer a stark contrast between a student who has achieved success, through immense commitment, but in a stable setting, and a student whose learning journey continues to be precarious and assailed by risk.

**Brief biographic vignette 1**

**Hayley Jevons, 27**

**Ordinary National Certificate (ONC) in Construction Studies Civil Engineering**

**Part-time**

A farm worker’s daughter, who *didn’t watch telly till I was six*, Hayley left secondary school at 16 with six GCSEs, 4 at Grades A-C and began work as an office junior for a bank. After developing RSI in her monotonous data entry clerk role she ceased work in 1998 and later went on to enrol at a nearby FE college on a nursery nurse course (NNEB). A serious relationship, marriage and pregnancy contributed to her leaving college after a year and a half – without the qualification. She had two daughters and worked part time in local playgroups and nursery units. Hayley is divorced from her husband following a traumatic couple of years, during which he was convicted of child sex offences. He is *banned from unsupervised access to them [their 2 daughters]*... it would be a social worker present at all times kind of thing - but I, and they, don't want it. He is totally out of our lives now.

In September 2005, Hayley enrolled for a part time Construction Studies ONC course involving a long college day of 0800 - 2100. She enjoyed being the only woman in the group of 30 students (the others are males on day release from employment) and was thrilled to be one of the 8 completers with a double distinction grade and more than sufficient University entrance (UCAS) points. Hayley has been more content during these two years, though the pressure of course work and her desire to earn high grades have often made her tired. *When I first started, I just wanted to pass but when the Ds [Distinctions] started rolling in –I wanted more than a pass!* In her Learning Journal she describes what works well for her as a learner and liking systematic lessons where teachers *demonstrate and explain the formulae and the whole class does a calculation together, this is written up on the board. We all then have a go at a similar calculation individually [LJ5]*. In class she has scolded the “*lads who try to copy my calculations*” preferring to help them understand the formulae rather than cheat.

Her course tutor, Evan Downs, singles her out not just because she is the only female student in a group of part time day release men: “*Hayley is a gem of a student! She is well organised and really gets into the criteria...she often does more than she needs to! Her Integrated Vocational Assignment [IVA] files are really sound.*” She feels that the course has changed her views dramatically and though she started with a loose idea of becoming *some sort of building professional*, she is now more aware of the range of careers open to her, and is now considering whether to pursue her original choice - a Building Surveying/Engineering degree - or an Architectural Technology degree at a different university.
Hayley is devoted to her two girls, aged 6 and 5, but as a single mother could not have completed the course without a reliable support network: *My girls get collected and everything is organised for their tea and dancing classes. I realise that I am lucky to have friends and family in the wings. I couldn’t do this course without that!* Having recently become a school governor and is currently leading an initiative to help the school be *greener and Eco friendly*. She speaks with great animation about *grey water systems* and *rainwater harvesting* and of her dreams to build an Eco house sometime in the future … *I recycle religiously and the girls don’t leave taps on when they’re doing their teeth!*

Hayley has juggled parenting, part-time work, a high level of difficult study and has succeeded, as a motivated learner, who has done lots of self directed learning after her girls left for school or went to bed: *For the last six months of the course I was still working at midnight! I don’t know how the boys who were all working full-time managed it – it’s far too much for a part time course. I couldn’t possibly have done it like that!* As the recipient of an annual £750 Wales Assembly Learning Grant (ALG), Hayley can only work 3 hours per week in local crèche otherwise her housing benefit is jeopardised. She now has a steady boyfriend who she count on 100% and without whom she could not have completed the ONC course successfully. She is helping him *gut and renovate* his 3 storey terraced house in the valley where she lives and using her skills as Project Manager, for example, supervising the installation of steel beams (*RSJs*) and *using the vocab with the builders … They think I’m really cool and they can’t pull anything over on us*. Hayley acknowledges how her FE course has changed her and is excited about continuing to HE; she already has ideas for a university dissertation: *I want to learn how to make older buildings sustainable without ruining the appearance of these beautiful old buildings because we don’t build for character anymore!* She has big dreams for the future and is passionate about eco-architecture and being green.
Implications

The two vignettes illuminate the interconnectedness of factors in the totality of learners' lives and their influences on learning. The learning cultures within which Hayley and Matt function transcend their institutions. Hayley's story exemplifies the complex of factors that contribute to achievement in a two year long learning episode. She has been able to work within a stable network of support, and, while she has supplemented her benefits with some part-time work, she has had time to devote to her studies – albeit frequently late at night. The stability of her external world has enabled her to be highly organised as a learner, and her motivation has been nourished by her success, her identity as a successful learner, and her growing sense of commitment to an imagined future as a professional working in architecture / construction technology. For Hayley, her learning is a major part of her life.

Brief biographic vignette 2
Matt Rees
Animal Care Diploma
Part-time

Matt Rees changed secondary school when his family moved house. He adapted reasonably well but left school at 16 with 5 GCSEs to join a council Training Department apprenticeship scheme as a tiler. He hated it and after one year recommenced full time study on a three year BTEC Drama course at an FE college, which: *I really enjoyed but never completed all the bits.* Matt did achieve the British Sign Language Certificate at this time, which he feels helped him subsequently secure employment in the caring sector. He has been employed as an NHS Trust support worker for 15 years, and describes himself as: *an auxiliary nurse for physically disabled or mentally ill patients in a residential setting.*

Matt has enrolled twice, in consecutive years, for the part time ABC in Animal Care course. He is a passionate and knowledgeable keeper of snakes, with dreams to manage or own a reptile shop. He did pet shop management on an earlier course and learned a great deal. Matt has two sons but only weekend or limited access to them and un-civil relations with their Mum.

There have been major conflicts at work following staffing cuts and a reduction in patient/nurse ratio for bathing duties. Matt complained about this situation, via his trade union and line manager, resulting in the local Health Trust initially suspending, and more recently dismissing him, based on allegations that he inappropriately lifted and carried a patient. With Legal Aid he is appealing against unfair dismissal. Depressed and frustrated, he became briefly homeless and was sleeping in a car, after his girlfriend threw him out: *I had to have a police escort to the flat in order to collect my snakes.*

His tutor, Mary Jarvis, reported that he was: *Very stressed and demoralised at the time.* She helped him by taking in his snakes when he was homeless: *These were a really excellent resource for the students and expanded what species we could teach.* Matt thinks that the College’s Animal Care staff are wonderful and have helped keep me from losing it altogether! He takes comfort in the fact that his name is kept on the course register and that he can re-enter the programme and retain, for at least five years, the units he has achieved.

Now on a jobseekers’ scheme, awaiting news of a formal appeal, and still dreaming of a future with snakes, M is in touch with some fellow students and enthusiastic about Mary’s teaching, her funny stories and her regular tests and quizzes. College staff, like Mary Jarvis, think: *He is great guy and a sad example of outside occupational life and difficult relationships making part time study really awkward.* They are happy to welcome him back and to support him, and hope that he can return to complete successfully so are *keeping him on the books.*

The learning cultures in which Hayley and Matt function transcend their institutions. Hayley’s story exemplifies the complex of factors that contribute to achievement in a two year long learning episode. She has been able to work within a stable network of support, and, while she has supplemented her benefits with some part-time work, she has had time to devote to her studies – albeit frequently late at night. The stability of her external world has enabled her to be highly organised as a learner, and her motivation has been nourished by her success, her identity as a successful learner, and her growing sense of commitment to an imagined future as a professional working in architecture / construction technology. For Hayley, her learning is a major part of her life.
In contrast, Matt Rees is struggling to maintain a learning life in a context of extreme instability and high risk, and this is his third attempt at the Animal Care course. With traumatic events in his work and personal lives he is unable to study a subject in which, ironically, he already has considerable expertise. While learning plays little part in his life at present, he is holding on to the transformative potential of learning in his imagined future of working with reptiles. College staff, in a form of collusion with Matt, are continuing to provide pastoral support both symbolically, by keeping his student registration live although he does not attend college, and practically, by taking care of his snakes.

Concluding remarks

Several of the adult learners in this project, including some included here, are not deterred, by significant circumstantial barriers, from participating in formal learning. The interviews further highlight the limitations and dangers of over-emphasising the metaphor of ‘barriers’ to participation; several of these learners have not been deterred by traditional barriers such as time, cost, travel and lack of initial qualification (Gorard et al 1999). However, explorations of individuals’ narratives reveal the impact of the resulting conditions of difficulty and the attendant risks that learners strive to cope with. Learners’ lives are about much more than being a learner – as the focus group and the very different cases of Hayley and Matt equally make clear. The adult learners are appreciative of the support provided by their teachers; this ethic of care, attending to the wider lives and circumstances of students, and deployed through teachers’ emotional labour, is central to the positive aspects of accounts provided by learners here and elsewhere in our research (Salisbury et al., 2006a).

With regard to learning outcomes, Schuller (2003) has noted that, compared to the attention given to motivation and participation, much less work has been done on the more complex questions of what happens as a result of learning, especially the wider benefits. The learners featured above were clear not only about skill acquisition and the achievement of formal learning outcomes but were emphatic about the wider benefits they had gained from their learning in confidence and self-belief. Some, for example parents of young children, were able recover a sense of adult identity, while others were able to develop an identity as a learner that had been denied to them earlier in life. Hayley demonstrated the effect of her successful learning on her sense of herself as a person in society, for example, her skill and confidence in dealing with professionals, and in her broader social participation as a school governor embracing a contemporary public narrative through initiatives on climate change.

These individual private stories are played out in the structural contexts of policies and institutions. Policies, at a meta-level, are far removed from the often messy realities of learners’ lives yet they are founded on conceptualisations of learners, for instance in the ever-increasing emphasis on skills agendas for ‘lifelong learning’ in the ‘knowledge economy’. Brine (2006) has delineated ways in which European Commission policy documents categorise learners crudely, yet with unflinching consistency, to ignore and obscure vital features (class, ethnicity, gender) and power relations. Too often learners are problematised and pathologised. In this context it is necessary for policy formation to recognise and understand both the social and cultural conditions of learning experienced by adult learners and the complex realities of learning lives as they are lived. The need for this is emphasised by the fact that further education colleges, and present policy preoccupations, in Wales and UK, are dominated by concerns about 14-19 learners and a degree of invisibility surrounds adult students in further education.
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