Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales

Working Paper No.8

The Learning Journey: young people’s experiences of further education

September, 2007

Jane Salisbury, Martin Jephcote, Gareth Rees, John Roberts

Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University
The Learning Journey: young people’s experiences of further education

Jane Salisbury, Martin Jephcote, Gareth Rees (Cardiff University), John Roberts (University of Wales, Newport)

This working paper was first presented by Jane Salisbury at the British Educational Research Association Conference, 5th-8th September, 2007, University of London, Institute of Education.

This is a working paper arising out of the ESRC funded TLRP programme, Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales project

Draft working paper
Please do not quote without permission of the authors
Corresponding author: Dr J. Salisbury, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University
salisburyJ@cf.ac.uk
Abstract

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’ 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 data confirms that the learning journeys that students embark on have their own antecedents rooted in disparate experiences of schooling and, that at relatively young ages, 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 most young learners as an important part of their lives but, is only a part of their lives, so that managing lives includes managing learning and often as life becomes complex and demanding, it is ‘learning’ that often pays the price. Students adopt a range of coping strategies, many looking to contain their studies within the timeframe of the college day so that at other times they can attend to other matters in their 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 the wider realities of their students’ lives.

Our conclusion does not offer a neat set of solutions. On the contrary, in recognition of the complex and individual nature of ‘learning journeys’ and the ‘collision’ of experiences that underpin learning calls for something of a complex response. Not least, although we have found the metaphor of a ‘learning journey’ helpful it is also problematic in the ways in which it might suggest a planned linear and continuous route.
Introduction

This paper draws upon a variety of data collected as part of a two year ESRC/TLRP funded research project ‘Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales’. 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.

FE colleges across the UK supply an important space for learners of all abilities and ages to study a subject, course or set of skills for their intrinsic interest, or for a qualification. A range of different enrolment types exist such as full time, part time, day release from work schemes and flexi study. Students present themselves at an FE college for a variety of reasons and with diverse motivational accounts. An analysis of official statistics over the last few decades or so, illustrate the patterns of participation in Further Education Colleges across the UK (Raffe et al ;2001). To-date, much attention has been given to patterns of participation in further, adult and continuing education, with growing interest in the lived experience of learning through exploring the nature of learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000), learning lives and learning trajectories (Gorard, Rees and Fevre, 1999). What these point to is not just the influences on participation but also to the nature of the engagement with learning opportunities and, importantly, how life outside college affects this. The concepts of learning careers and learning lives conveys the ways in which engagement can change over time, but individual trajectories suggest that they are constrained within the parameters of their social group. In the sections which follow we hope to depict the complexity and often thwarted nature of an individual’s “learning journey.”

In Wales approximately three quarters of 16-18 year olds are learning outside of the school sector. In 2004/5 there were some 90,000 enrolments by young people aged 19 or under outside the school sector with almost two thirds of enrolments being at one of Wales’s 23 Further Education institutions.(Wales Assembly Government 2006). This paper focuses on a sub-set of learners in the study who can be described as ‘younger’ students, that is, those aged 16-19 (at the outset of our research project) on full-time courses of study on either academic or vocational programmes of study identified by teachers from seven FE college campuses. For the purposes of this paper we have distinguished them from other older learners, that is, those over the age of 22, predominantly on part-time courses. These students agreed to have us follow their ‘learning journey’ over two years where they became core participants whom we interviewed, observed in sessions and who were invited to keep a learning journal. A further 110 younger students were participants in one of 18 focus group interviews conducted with mixed groups of students in the summers of 2006 and 2007.
Background and rationale

In the era of mass education, perhaps it is inevitable that we tend to be drawn to look at the nature of aggregated ‘performance’ and to the identification of those factors that give rise to it. Thus, with increasingly large institutions, at both the macro level and micro level of colleges, there is a strong concern with performativity which, in turn, drives the ways in which colleges are managed, the curriculum organised and how learning and teaching is ‘delivered’ (Salisbury, et al., 2006). As we and others have reported elsewhere there is a real and pressing concern with recruitment, retention and results.

Hitherto, in the main, performance has been linked to and addressed in terms of common characteristics such as class, socio-economic status, gender and race. As we have reported at BERA 2006 (Jephcote, et al.) some FE teachers use their own looser ways of describing and accounting for students’ performance, also including assumptions about locality. At the same time, what comes through from teacher’s interview accounts, journals and more so from our close engagement with them over the last two years, is for many of them a concern not just with measurable performance in the form of examination results, but also in what is commonly termed ‘the wider benefits of learning’, such as the acquisition of life skills, social competences and all that is involved with staying on, often against the odds (see Salisbury et al., 2006). Many, but not all of the teachers in our study, did their best to attend to what was needed in order to maximise the performance potential of their students, but went much further in recognising the importance of students’ wider lives, how this impacts on their learning and engagement at college and, in turn, they also attended to these wider lives. A number of teachers stated how they could not ignore what was going on in their students’ wider lives because this affected what went on in classrooms. Indeed, some, for example, told us that the week could not begin until these ‘personal’ issues had been listened to.

What these teachers were pointing to is the complexity of students’ lives and, indeed, this was also evident from our interactions with them. Increasingly, we became aware that to be a ‘full-time’ student at a college of FE was only a part, in many cases only a small part of the make up of a student’s life and, moreover, we were struck by the ways in which many young people’s lives were so complex (Jephcote and Salisbury, TLRP, 2007). In obvious ways, this translated for some students into little real engagement with their college courses and many openly told us about how little time they spent on their studies. As they revealed to us, there is in fact much to occupy their lives, some of it to do with prevailing financial circumstances, some of it to do with relationships and some of it to do with being on inappropriate courses or not having the skills and attitudes to ‘succeed’.

So, for us, as with many of the teachers in our study, we have become interested in the individual, with their individual stories and lives, captured in what we begun by calling the ‘learning journey’. Thus, the focus here is not on groups but on individuals and the telling of their narravatised stories. They are important for a number of reasons. First, they remind us that students are flesh and blood people who should not only or primarily be regarded as ‘learning units’ which draw down money. Secondly, and related to the first point, individuals are just that. They come with different histories, they have differing aspirations and in different ways they exercise their free will. The collectivised approaches of mass education seem to be a poor fit for so many. Those packaged attempts to address the perceived shortcomings of the curriculum experience by the
introduction of learning styles inventories and, in turn, requirements that teachers map into their plans and lesson delivery ways of accommodating the range are pandering to the commodification of education. They are attempts to solve the perceived problem by the introduction of what actually amount to a standardised, automated, if not tokenistic response. They are a weak form of ‘customisation’, as exists in the number of identified learner traits and teacher responses, an illusionary form of individualisation or personalised learning. The danger is that they cause an added pressure for already pressurised teachers and divert them and wider college resources away from doing what they already do best.

Providing these narratives of the learning journey of young adults in FE is, therefore, not just to highlight the plight of so many young people and to draw attention to the sometimes dire circumstances in which they struggle to be ‘full-time’ students. There are important messages for FE teachers and college managers, and for those who comprise the policy communities that can make a difference. In short, for many of our young learners, the learning journey is a perilous one and whereas we can continue to use aggregated notions of learners and their backgrounds to produce aggregated responses, there is a need to be more mindful of what it is like to live in contemporary Wales (Britain), what it is like to be a student in contemporary FE.

Introducing Howard, Sam and Evan: three “young” full time FE students

Three vignettes of students who have managed, or who are striving to manage their student lives are presented in this section to illustrate some of the constraints and difficulties in their wider outside lives alongside their on campus/in college successes. The three vignettes are potted summaries of full and rich individual qualitative data sets which we are currently assembling for each of the 47 “core” students in the research project sample. The students attend the three FE colleges where we have undertaken the in depth research. The vignettes illustrate well the ups and downs in many young lives and throw further light upon the challenges experienced by students but also faced by FE teachers and reported in our earlier papers (Salisbury et al 2006a, Roberts et al 2006; Jephcote et al 2006).

Howard Rolls [18-20]


Brief Vignette:
Howard the youngest of 5 with three sisters and a half brother. Describes himself as a “very poor school attender” who achieved a grade C in GCSE PE –though he doesn’t know “how this came about because I was off school for most of Yr 11 with IBS” [irritable bowel syndrome]. “I didn’t leave my bed room because of hostilities with my step father.” [Mother’s boyfriend]. At 17 he participated in a 13 week IT Skills course at a local Training Centre and got £40 per week, but work experience placements were difficult to find and he was not well enough and too nervous to be travelling. He failed to attend a referral to a counsellor “the stomach thing happened again so I couldn’t go.” A course of Valium “didn’t do anything just numbed me and it didn’t help me to leave the house. Then he [doctor] prescribed me anti-anxiety pills which worked a treat but I felt no emotion. I’d sit and be quiet and stare at the ceilings and I could leave the house, but I wouldn’t want to leave the house.”
Howard still has “nerves” and is unable to eat breakfast because of his condition till mid morning in college. Scared he will “have an accident on the bus!” Admits that he came to college because his neighbour was coming and it made it easier to come with a friend. Arrives at college often tired but keen. Completes assignments in his bedroom on computers that his dad has bought updates for and likes to get feedback promptly so he can complete tasks and earn high grades. Won the 2006 GNVQ Intermediate Computing student prize following a stack of distinctions grades. Howard is really irritated when classmates don’t do the necessary course work. He and a girlfriend whom he met on the GNVQ course, sit together and do keep to deadlines but are held back from starting new assignments by other students who gobble up teachers’ time on their late submissions, catch up work and re-draftings. Howard feels this is unfair.

Finds it financially difficult relying on his mum and dad for handouts. Is very judgemental about mates who waste their £30 EMA money on alcohol. He worked for 4 months in a part-time Agency cleaning job at ASDA supermarket 4.30-8am but his early rising disturbed the household causing rows with his step father and also made him fall asleep in class! The tense relationship has worsened over the two years he has been at college. Howard has left home a few times briefly when things were difficult [staying with a sister or friend] but returned for his mum. He hopes that his father can organise a flat next year so he can get away from his mother’s boyfriend who orders Take-Away pizzas and curries for his own two sons excluding Howard. This dominating man allocates him a tiny area of the fridge and half a shelf for storing food. Family life sounds fraught and Howard becomes quite emotional when talking about it.

Penny Amery his Course tutor champions his case, keeps in touch with him via email and phone calls. She offers praises and affirms him: “Howard could have easily done the National Diploma this year but for friendship reasons, he did the NC instead which is too easy really.” This teacher knows him well and recognises that he is VERY isolated at home and needs to be with the friends he has made at college. Howard was attending college even after his course had more or less wound up to support the non-finishers who were resubmitting assignments late. “When the lecturers use me as an example for the other students…they say, if you do this like Howard or, if you go and ask Howard, and they approach me and I have helped them, and I get a great sense of satisfaction from helping them and it’s really nice to be valued, yes.” In the Micro lab Howard is a serious and industrious student, he feels significant, enjoys the effort; “and it’s paying off with all of the Ds [distinctions] I’m getting and the way the lecturers look at me-they treat me differently compared to some of the people who are scraping passes- and Penny [tutor] thinks it’s brilliant that she gets the pleasure to teach people like me and Mandy” [girlfriend]."

He is currently unsure about ideas for future employment, "I don ‘t know what jobs I can get with this qualification. Er – there was an article in the newspapers saying they’re crying out for IT technicians and everything in Wales. But there’s no advertisement for it.” Howard has concerns about the value of his IT qualifications in the labour market, “the only fear I’ve got about doing all of this work is that one of my classmate’s father has a degree in IT but works as a security guard in Tescos!”

Howard hopes to continue computing studies at a local university but would like to go with mates not alone. He likes “hands on learning and self researching” and loves doing witty IT presentations. In class he is strategic about his seating position: “being around
friends can make me comfortable, being in the same class as friends is comfortable but when you sit with them that's a distraction. But I sit on the other side of the room and if I want an interaction I can go across, talk to them and they come and talk to me. So its the comfort of knowing I'm surrounded by people who like me, who are doing the same thing, in the same boat and I know them.”. Close relationships with his teachers and peers along with tangible success, Penny feels “compensate for a difficult home situation. "She describes Howard as having “blossomed from the nervous awkward student who joined the GNVQ course in September 2005.”

Sam Bindle [19-21]

BTEC Nat. Cert in 3xD Design

Brief Vignette:
Sam reports a chequered school history. His school teachers would remember him as “a rather difficult pupil...often in trouble... I just didn't want to be there....I was a bit of a rebel... I didn't take it all that serious”. Obtained nine GCSEs (grades B-D) but admits “my mind was on other things!" He remained at school for most of year 12 and did AS level Design and Technology but was rebellious and left St Tynewydd’s Church of Wales comprehensive at 17 to work in Halfords for 18 months installing car radios and serving customers on the shop floor. He surprised and delighted his parents when at 19 and "having had enough of working in a dead end job" he secretly enrolled on the BTEC 3xD Design Course and announced it over the phone to his Dad.

Mixed efforts were reported by college staff in year one, “he didn’t exactly kill himself and put the hours in!” Nevertheless he achieved an overall merit in 3 x D Design, and continued to higher course with firm ideas for university in 2007. Convicted of ABH[actual bodily harm] following an incident with a thrown glass in a pub ["pissed- not intentional “etc] took him for a short stretch in HMP Oak Prison in June-July 2006. He reflected on this as “a real learning experience” and believes that it helped him sort himself out. Community service followed and he worked on the allotments of senior citizens, did some anger management training and met with a probation officer weekly. His parents were supportive and forgiving as the pub incident was related to a bad relationship with a girl who had "put me under pressure to leave school, earn £12k at Halfords rather than go to college and get qualified.” The bad relationship, "which is now sorted and over" Sam attributes to his earlier underachievement and recklessness.

He now works at Halfords just part time at weekends. He upholsters car boots and installs sound systems for his mates as a hobby. Tends to do course work in college mainly though does lot of internet searching and uses “Google sketcher” at home for his 3D drawings and design work. In his Learning Journal entries he describes enjoying “…planning projects and working things out by trial and error. I learn best that way. It works or it doesn’t and the problem solving helps me find solutions. Tutors are on hand to suggest ideas and show us what might work and I like the individual 1 to 1 way in which they work with us.”[LJ5] Course tutor Doug is delighted with Sam’s progress and standard of both design and practical work. As a result he was 2007 Student of the Year [for his course ] and received a prize at the prestigious College Summer Exhibition and Prize giving. Parents especially Mum were visibly emotional : “ He has turned
himself around, you don’t know what that means to us all!” He wants to be a graduate and has accepted a place at University of Glamorgan for 2007 to do HND/BSc route. His ultimate goal is civil engineering like his Dad [a highly paid project manager working on the London Tube for Balfour Beattie...] whom he clearly admires.

In the 2nd interview he revealed that he has two sons aged 4 and 2 but that his ex is difficult; “She’s not a very nice person. She doesn’t let me see them because I’m in college.” “It was like we had big rows about college and going to Uni and she wanted me to work. And I wanted to take some time to study to go further. But she didn’t understand that.” He misses seeing them and the ex refuses to let his mum see her grandsons too. Sam is upset by all of this but tries to remain focussed on his goals.

He is motivated by ideas of material wealth and lifestyle, his dad’s status and new Volvo; “Obviously like at home I look at my life now and I just think I’ve got it really easy, like my parents and stuff, I get everything off my dad. But I want to be able to give that - where we live, and the money, the job, I want all of it”. Describing the influences on his dreams and goals he depicts his father;” My Dad’s a project manager so he does different jobs all the time. He really enjoys it. There’s not many people above him, he’s worked really hard like that. So I want to - I kind of want to be like that."

Evan Jones [16-18]

First Diploma in Animal Care & National Diploma in Animal Management

Brief Vignette:
Evan did not enjoy secondary school where he felt there was a lack of respect for pupils and he found some subjects tedious. He changed secondary schools and locality twice for family related reasons and ended up in Todcatt Comprehensive where, he was entered for and to his teachers’ surprise, passed 9 GCSEs at grades C to E. With four at grade C he was eligible to enrol for an Animal Care course at the Land based Studies campus of a nearby FE College and to receive an EMA of £30 per week.

Evan is enthusiastic in theory lessons and practicals and keeps files well organised and his notes are filed and handouts are annotated systematically. He mainly completes college assignments on site in LRC or during classroom time as he does not have access to IT at home. Occasionally Evan does take some course work home if deadlines are close. He adores practical work and learns from “hands on” direct handling of animals and equipment.” With the practical side - they don’t tell you how to groom a horse. You actually – they show you and then they let you do it!"

Fostered out some years ago after major family dysfunctions and violence. Evan lives in a foster family alongside their own 12 year old daughter and another 12 year old boy also fostered. At weekends he stays over with his Nanna a bus ride away. He does not disclose details of his prior experiences other than to say “family difficulties broke us up” though his personal tutor is familiar with his case. Traumatic news was given to Evan the day before his 18th Birthday in March 2007 when he was told, “now we don’t get any money for you you’ll have to leave,” by instrumental foster folk. This caused Evan a period of anxious instability. His teacher Tina Noaks wrote about his predicament in her Learning Journal. Fears of homelessness and of his abilities to maintain studies were expressed by the close knit staff in the Animal Care unit. Evan feels that the relationships he has with staff and classmates are supportive.
Doing really well at his current course with distinction grades on the majority of study units. He earned a D in First Diploma in Animal Care 2005-6 and now has just completed the 1st year of FD Animal Management. Staff have rallied and tried to organise accommodation in On-Campus hostel. But this was difficult as Evan works 7 days per week evenings in a chip shop [and non-waged work experience in a pet shop on Saturday and Sunday] to get enough money to pay rent so that he can stay in his Foster home. In Spring 2007 he reported exhaustion, faints, and had lost weight. There was a fear that he might not cope well with the punishing hours of low paid casual work and full time study.

Won the 2006 prize for Student of Year in Animal Care at the Campus ceremony and now has goals set on a HE course at Hartbury college in GLOUCs. His teachers believe that he is “well capable of degree work provided his personal situation remains stable…..he is at risk but is hugely motivated to get a career as a veterinary nurse or something!” His recent VET work experience venue have offered him some paid evening hours next academic year assisting as a nurse because he was efficient and resourceful; “I had to hold animals whilst the vet examined them. I assisted with everything and I even helped with a few operations holding the animals in place and monitoring their breathing…I had to hold this big owl’s leg while they cleaned it because it was infected. And I assisted with a few spayings and a dental treatment.”

Evan is very organised and expert with the menagerie of creatures in the Small Animal Unit, Working Farm and adjacent Horse Stables. He is so trusted by college staff that he will be paid to feed and clean the animals each morning at the Animal Unit, throughout staff vacation periods, and has security codes and keys. He is very proud of this much coveted student job which is only given to students who have demonstrated knowledge, skill and maturity. Recent good news shared at final interview is that his social worker has sorted a new build flat for him in the town of Todcatt which should be completed by late August 2007! Howard is excited about being independent and being able to choose his kitchen tiles and colour scheme. He talks to his Mum on the phone weekly and reports that she is encouraging him to go to Uni... He describes “a minimal social life” as he is too busy now earning for to pay for his keep. He does however appear to enjoy a close circle of mates on the same course with whom he hangs out with at breaks.

**Concluding remarks**

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 young 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’ 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 data confirms that the learning journeys that students embark on have their own antecedents rooted in disparate experiences of schooling and, that at relatively young ages, 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’.

Our conclusion does not offer a neat set of solutions. On the contrary, in recognition of the complex and individual nature of ‘learning journeys’ and the ‘collision’ of experiences that underpin learning calls for something of a complex response. Not least, although we have found the metaphor of a ‘learning journey’ helpful it is also problematic in the ways in which it might suggest a planned, linear and continuous route.

Acknowledgements;

1. The paper arises out of an ESRC funded research project - Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales which is part of the ESRC/TLRP extension to Wales programme.

2. We are of course grateful to the 3 participating colleges whose management and teaching staff from across seven campuses have opened their doors to us and who along with students, agreed to participate in the research project and given us their permission to use interview, journal and observational data.

References


This document was added to the Education-Line database on 21 November 2008