Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales

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Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales: emerging findings from a two year study

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Summary

This project, funded by the ESRC/Teaching and Learning Research Programme, tracks the real-time ‘journeys’ of a group of teachers and their students over a two-year period to provide a contemporary account of what it is like to work and learn in further education. With the intention of producing rich in-depth qualitative data, it draws on interview and focus group transcripts, diaries and detailed first-hand ethnographic observation.

The overall intention is to provide a better understanding of learning processes and the ways in which these are influenced by wider social and economic contexts as well as the policy frameworks through which further education is regulated. This paper draws from previous papers and from more recent fieldwork and, although at an early stage of analysis, early findings point to, for example, the complexities of learners’ lives as a key constraint on their learning and the need for teachers to invest heavily in ‘emotional labour’ as a coping strategy to deal with the many challenges they face.

About the project

Learning Working in Further Education in Wales is a collaborative project between the Cardiff School of Social Sciences, the University of Wales Newport and three colleges of education in South Wales chosen to reflect a range of economic and social contexts necessary to provide the data needed to shed light on our research questions.

The project aims to provide a better understanding of learning processes in further education with a distinctive focus on the ways in which learning outcomes (of all kinds) are a product of the social interaction of students and teachers. The study also aims to examine the ways in which learning processes are influenced by wider economic and social contexts as well as the policy framework through which further education is regulated in Wales.

Given our focus on learning outcomes as a product of social interactions, we are interested in the kinds of social engagement and social conditions that provide a context for learning to take place. Broadly, our research questions are to do with:

- the nature of social interactions between students and teachers and how diverse learning outcomes are produced from this interaction;
- how the characteristics of the settings in which learning takes place influence the character of the interaction between students and teachers;
- the ways in which learner identities are shaped by the wider economic, social and cultural environment and how learning processes and outcomes are influenced by these identities;
- how teachers construct their professional practice and how learning processes and outcomes are affected by these dispositions;
the ways in which learning processes and outcomes are influenced by the distinctive policy regime in Wales.

To answer these questions and to provide the sort of illuminative account that we envisaged we have employed a multi-method qualitative approach. Our study, which sets out to explore learning and working in contemporary further education in Wales is firmly based upon qualitative methods which are ‘sensitive to the social context in which data are produced’ (Mason, 2002). Working in three colleges across South Wales we identified an ‘ideal’ range of subject areas so that, in turn, we could sample both teachers and learners within them, ensuring that over the course of the study we kept within three research frames: full-time academic courses (with mainly 16-19 year old A level students in mind); full-time vocational courses (with 16-19 year olds and older returners to learning in mind); and, part-time vocational courses (with mainly older learners in mind). At each college we began with a sample of at least nine teachers and fifteen students and in the early months of the project we ‘filled gaps’, especially in the cases of students who left. The idea has been to follow the ‘learning journeys’ of students and teachers over a two year period from when students embarked on a learning programme, through to its completion or their earlier entry into the labour market.

For each student and for each teacher this involves them in:

- an in-depth interview at the start and end of the project;
- regular completion of structured learning journals;
- extensive first-hand observation of learning in a variety of settings including classrooms, open learning centres and workshops.

Additionally, groups of nine students (not those above) reflecting the three research frames and the three colleges are drawn into nine separate focus groups at the mid-point and end of the project.

In total this will give us at least:

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<td>Teacher Interviews</td>
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<td>Student Interviews</td>
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<td>Teacher’s Learning Journals</td>
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<td>Student’s Learning Journals</td>
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<td>Student Focus Groups</td>
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(Numbers in brackets indicate an estimated 60% response rate)
In addition, first-hand observation has taken about 65 days and produced field notes, expanded accounts and analytic themes.

At this stage of reporting, all fieldwork except for a minority of the second in-depth interviews with teachers and students has been completed. We describe ourselves as ‘data rich’ and that data we do have is at various stages of refinement with much yet to be done with the analysis of later fieldwork and focus group interviews. Thus, when we later present some of our findings it should be kept in mind that the data and the analyses are partial. Indeed, answering some of our key questions relies on the piecing together of a complex account revealed only from an analysis of data from all sources. That said, we are already confident about some key emerging themes. Before turning to these we want to say something about the context in Wales.

About Wales

Education policy making and implementation is an area subject to devolved governance in Wales, the responsibility for which rests with the Welsh Assembly Government, though, as yet, there is little discernible change in the overall context and governance of further education. Policies made in Whitehall such as the Leitch Review continue to pervade and the report into Wales’ own review of further education is not expected until mid-December 2007. It is the case, however, that in 1999 devolved powers were passed to the elected National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government, making them responsible for almost all educational policy making and implementation. Hitherto, some believed that Wales ‘lacked a distinctive policy-making community’ and that policies made in Westminster were applied ‘without significant modification’. Although soon to change, this was indicative of limited Welsh autonomy where a role of Welsh civil servants was, according to Loughlin and Sykes (2004, pp.1-2), to see ‘how faithfully they could apply these to Wales’.

In Wales, the White Paper Building Excellent Schools Together (BEST, July, 1997) identified the need for more coherence and less competition and prioritised the need for better collaboration between schools, further and higher education and training providers. An Education and Training Action Group for Wales (ETAG) was established to provide strategic direction and went on to publish an Education and Training Action Plan (ETAP, 1998) for Wales. New structures to enhance post-16 education training in Wales were established under the Learning and Skills Act, which received Royal Assent in July 2000. The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), known in Wales as Dysg, was formed in November 2000 out of the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), itself an outcome of the merger in 1995 of the Further Education Unit (FEU) which focused on curriculum issues, and the Staff College which provided training and development for staff in the sector. Dysg worked to raise the quality of post-16 education and training by conducting research to inform policy and practice and through improvement and support programmes for providers. From April 2001, Education and Learning Wales (ElWa) took over the responsibilities of NACETT, the National Advisory Council for Education and Training and also the FE Funding Council, thus taking overall responsibility for funding and planning education and training for the over 16s, including sixth-forms from April 2002. Its mission was ‘to promote lifelong learning and provide world-class learning opportunities for all in Wales to realise their potential’ (www.elwa.org.uk accessed 6th March, 2006). In part, this was to be achieved by approving and funding improvements in service delivery proposed by Community Consortia for Education and Training (CCETs) and through the development of collaborative learning networks. From March 2001 the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) were wound up and
their functions variously transferred to EIWa, Careers Wales and the pre-existing Welsh Development Agency.

Taken together, these changes were an attempt to overcome the piecemeal and limited scope of previous reform, to bring about partnership at the regional and sub-regional level and to encourage more adults to enter learning provision. The intention was for money available to ‘be channelled where it is needed and used in the most efficient way possible’ with the purpose of these changes in the structure ‘to remove wasteful competition and encourage partnership between different elements of post-16 learning’ (EIWa, *On the Road to World Class Training and Education*, undated). Without wishing to undermine the good intentions, it was the case that these new structures met with limited success and were later replaced with a single Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DELLS). However, these structures and the working practices associated with them had led to some significant departures from those in England. Indeed, it is argued that devolution has meant that education policies in Wales have become increasingly distinct from those in England (Rees, 2004) and, at least until now, there appears to have been a greater consensus in educational policy making and some progress has been made in relation to the reform of post-16 education. Attention has been given to improving collaboration and partnership between schools and colleges, largely prompted by the associated problems of high levels of truancy, disengagement from schooling, crime and later non-engagement in education and training. The publication of *Making the Connections: delivering better services for Wales* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004) called for improved networking arrangements between learning providers to enhance learners’ opportunities post-14 and is one of a number of attempts to foster collaboration between schools and FE colleges, and ending competition over the provision of vocational learning. In 2004 Geographic Pathfinder Surveys in six areas of Wales were commissioned by EIWa to indicate the potential for rationalising the learning infrastructure post-16. The intention was to foster collaboration as a means of increasing choice, secure a coherent policy framework to provide national consistency but with regional flexibility and to develop frameworks that would be responsive to learners’ needs.

It was claimed that ‘Wales was leading the way in the UK’ with respect to the promotion of flexible provision and the promotion of parity of esteem (Dysg, 2005, p.4). There has been the development of a 14-19 learning pathways programme whose aim is to offer a more balanced and flexible approach to the education of 14-19 year olds. Amongst other things, this seeks to offer wider qualifications than GCSE, AS and A level and enhance the position and status of work related learning. The aim is to keep learners in education and training, provide them with subject options and progression into related employment or further/higher education. Crucially, this is dependent on the creation of a ‘new learning infrastructure… to provide collaboratively the framework for Learning Pathways for learners and drawing upon the resources of schools, FE colleges and training providers’ (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006a). Unlike in England, the salary scales for full-time lecturers have been brought into line with those of school teachers. By 2010 the development of a National Planning and Funding System (NPFS) will have equalised the levels of funding allocated to those providing post-16 learning, other than higher education. In sharp contrast to the attitudes conveyed by the rejection of the Tomlinson Report in England, in Wales there is more support for a diploma style award and, more importantly, the wider curriculum experience this provides. Since 2003 schools and FE colleges have piloted a ‘Welsh Baccalaureate’ qualification which builds on existing accredited courses and provides additional components including Key Skills, work and community based experience and an extended study. In Wales there is a well developed Credit and Qualifications Framework and bilingual and Welsh medium provision is to be expanded.
In the meantime, as the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning noted in the foreword to the paving document *The Learning Country: a comprehensive education and lifelong learning programme to 2010 in Wales* (The National Assembly for Wales, 2001), a ‘turning point for education’ had been reached. This was the first comprehensive strategic document on education and lifelong learning in Wales. It was also the first on education to set out primary and secondary legislation, thus marking another significant departure from England. As the Minister noted, ‘we shall take our own policy direction where necessary, to get the best for Wales’ in realisation of her vision that ‘Wales should become internationally renowned as a Learning country: a place that puts learners’ interests first’.

In April 2006, at the halfway point in the ten year strategic plan for education and lifelong learning in Wales set out in 2001 in ‘The Learning Country’, *The Learning Country 2: delivering the promise* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006b) was produced as a consultation document. It recorded progress in achieving the policy trajectory set out in 2001 and re-stated commitments up to and beyond 2010. The publication of *The Learning Country 2* also marked the merger of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for Wales (ACCAC), Education and Learning Wales (ELWa), the Wales Youth Agency, Dysg (the Learning and Skills Development Agency arm in Wales) and the Department for Education and Training to form a single new Department of Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DELLS). This was born out of both a political commitment to bring to an end the power of non-governmental bodies, the number of which had proliferated during the period of the Conservative Party administration from 1979 to 1997 and a desire to create a strengthened capacity for the post-devolution state in Wales in the field of education and lifelong learning. This merger of these non-governmental bodies somewhat pre-empted the publication of the Beecham Report (Welsh Assembly Government, June 2006c) which reported on its review of local service delivery. This report noted the ways in which innovation had been inhibited by a conservative organisational culture and lack of public debate, reflecting an attachment to the status quo. In this regard, it drew attention to the lack of progress in rationalising provision across school sixth-forms, FE and other training providers as a means of improving quality of provision first advocated in the ETAP report in 1999. It also suggested that the failure to break the link between deprivation and low performance was, in part, dependent on this rationalisation and the development of individual learning pathways at 14-19.

In October 2006 the publication of *The Learning Country: vision in to action* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006d) was an opportunity for the Minister for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills to re-affirm her commitment to the transformation of education and lifelong learning in post-devolution Wales. In post-14 and further education and training there continues to be a strong signal for the need for better collaboration between providers and, for 14-19 year olds, support for the Learning Pathways programme which offers enhanced choice and flexibility. Following its external evaluation (see Greatbatch et al., 2006), there is a commitment to ‘roll-out’ the Welsh Baccalaureate at Advanced and Intermediate levels in post-16 education and piloting a Foundation level model parallel with the Intermediate model, with 14-19 year olds from September 2007. It also promises a review of the strategic mission of the FE sector to ‘consider the extent to which FE institutions should focus more clearly on economically useful skills; the extent to which they should specialise; efforts to improve quality; the place of self-regulation and other measures to streamline governance...’
Post-16 education in Wales: an overview

As fforwm, the association of college principals in Wales suggested ‘the FE sector is central to the Welsh Assembly Governments’ agendas to widen participation, tackle social exclusion and stimulate economic regeneration’ (fforwm, 2005). However, lack of resources such as staff time, funding and staff development have hampered progress and there is evidence that some colleges have had to rationalise provision and make staff redundant (Dysg, 2005).

There are 23 colleges of further education in Wales, the largest (also the fifth largest in the UK) with 35,000 students. According to Dysg (the LSDA in Wales) high levels of casualisation of the workforce, which were described as ‘significant’ (Dysg, 2005), correlate with lack of requirements for qualified status although requirements for initial qualifications are being instigated. Eighty-three per cent of teachers hold a Certificate of Education or PGCE and 70% of part-time teachers at least a certificate, compared to 62% and 44% respectively in England (fforwm/FENTO press release). Fforwm and FENTO have highlighted associated issues. For example, casualisation is a particular problem in engineering, computing, ICT, applied sciences and business and an increasing problem in art and design, hairdressing and beauty therapy, caring and health. Forty nine per cent of college teachers work on a part-time casual basis of whom 71% are female. Moreover, colleges are faced with an ageing population where 35% of full-time staff are over 51 years of age and 57% over the age of 45 (FENTO/fforwm press release).

FE colleges provide 80% of all post-16 qualifications and in the academic year 2003-04 provided for 272,735 enrolments on learning programmes. There were a further 73,500 enrolments in community learning programmes. Eighty-five per cent of total enrolments were part-time, 12% full-time and 3% were in work-based learning. Ninety-six per cent of learners whose ethnicity was recorded were white and of those learners from a minority ethnic group half were Asian. Over one-third (36%) of learning activities with a known credit level were in a level 1 qualification, 34% were at level 2 and 19% were at level 3 (National Assembly for Wales, 2005). Nought point four per cent of learning activities were taken entirely through Welsh and 2.3% through bilingual provision.

Of the 701,565 learning activities 577,665 were taken in FE (85,275 in community learning settings, 1,560 in HE, and 37,060 in work-based learning). Of the total FE population, a relatively small number of students were engaged in GCSEs and A levels however, more A levels are taken in FE than in Schools and there are more 16-19 learners in FE than in schools.

Emerging themes and foreshadowed issues

As qualitative researchers striving to work across a number of institutions, we inevitably faced a number of barriers and complications in conducting this research. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) pointed out, the ‘situational constraints’ of the research process shape the nature of the inquiry. These constraints influence the type of work that can be done, the kind of data that can be collected and the final results of any given study. The nature of interpersonal relationships, time and resource constraints, and countless other factors complicate the data collection process. Unlike quantitative methods which are somewhat removed from real life, qualitative research collects data in natural contexts (Flick, et al., 2004). Much of the research setting, (in our case this includes three colleges, nine campuses, classrooms, workshops, studios, micro labs, libraries, staff rooms and offices across south Wales), was out of the
control of the research team, but nonetheless, many of our choices, decisions and actions have had consequences and constrained the research process.

A ‘green light’ from those at the top-up of the hierarchy of consent (Dingwall, 1980) did not make us forget that access is an ongoing issue which would last the duration of the two-year project. Gaining access into an FE College, into a faculty, into a department, a classroom, should not be underestimated as a methodological issue. In the early stages, doors were opened as swiftly as others were closed and our skills of negotiation were required as we met with each college’s academic board, curriculum managers and heads of departments. Overall, however, the ongoing enthusiasm and level of engagement with our project displayed by college managers, teachers and students is heartening.

Though analytically appropriate, the original plans to study intensely a sample of teachers and learners from the same three programme areas in each FE college were not viable. Leisure and Tourism was ‘thinning out’ at one college and Business Studies courses were under recruiting at another. Inevitably the pragmatic solution involved agreeing upon a study focus that both the research team and gatekeepers were willing and able to live with - a solution which would still enable the key research questions to be addressed.

We felt welcome, not grudgingly tolerated and we have witnessed some emotional moments and, in general, our informants have seemed willing to open up to us about the trials and tribulations of their day-to-day work and studies and reveal the intersections with their wider lives. Reflecting our wishes the core teacher participants include both full and part-time staff from vocational and academic curriculum areas whose ages range from mid-20s to late 50s. Without exception, all of them have fascinating and somewhat chequered career histories having joined the teaching profession following other forms of employment. The core students in our study are aged between 17 and 45 years, attending full-time academic and vocational programmes or on part-time ‘day release’ vocational courses. Some are in receipt of an Assembly Learning Grant (ALG), others a £30 per week Educational Maintenance Allowance and all but two are engaged in ‘part-time’ ‘casual’ employment.

Information obtained is of course always conditioned by the social and physical contexts from which it arises. Texts are increasingly compiled through collaboration, co-authorship with informants who respond to questions, frames and the progressive focusing of researchers. Observation is no longer a method but a context of interaction (Angrosino and Mays de Peretz, 2000). Our informants have responded positively to the fact that we have taken an interest in their histories and ongoing lives and many have been eager to share personal narratives, collectively generating a rich vein of data on life histories and individual career and learning journeys. Indeed, we have sometimes been surprised at the levels of intimacy and the sorts of information some have wanted to share and have taken this as both an indication and confirmation of the ways in which being a learner or being a teacher does not go on in isolation from other aspects of their lives.

Given the still early stage of the project and the time remaining to collect and analyse data we do not want to pre-empt later emerging findings. However, these are to do with:

- Prior experiences of schooling are often negative: many students carry with them into further education their negative experiences of schooling which they use to explain and justify their current dispositions to learning and many teachers perceived further education to be the 'last chance saloon'
- Teachers’ invest heavily in emotional labour as a form of coping strategy to deal with the pressure and stresses they face from college managers and especially from challenging learners.

- We are struck by the complex lives that young and older students lead and their accounts and our observations continue to remind us that for them, being at college and following courses of study is only a part of their wider lives. This presents challenges to teachers and the need for them to display a different sort of emotional labour.

- Teachers’ real and assumed knowledge about their students localities and lives constructs differing learner identities and classroom practices and reinforces the view that what goes on inside a college site is in some ways connected with, and a reflection of, what goes on in the society around it.

- Whereas the need for students to obtain accredited qualifications drives much of the learning and teaching, the majority of teachers and some students attach (more) importance to what is now commonly termed ‘the wider benefits of learning’.

- ‘Learning journeys’ provide a useful metaphor to conceptualise and theorise about the complexities of learning and working in contemporary further education. 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.

On schooling and transitions into further education...

Virtually all interviewees claimed that further education gave learners more time, more individualised help and that schools had failed large numbers of pupils because of their inability to tailor appropriately. Much contrastive rhetoric (Hargreaves, 1984) was used by our informants to describe what they saw as the discontinuities between school and college. A commonly held perception existed that FE is a ‘last chance saloon’ and the work of its staff is ameliorative, compensatory and vitally important. The majority of our teacher informants came across as highly motivated and wanting to improve their learners’ life chances. The biographical data we collected revealed that many had themselves experienced chequered educational histories at school and were late developers. Many claimed that the twists and turns of their own employment careers and late entry into the teaching profession made them powerful role models for their students.
I tell them, ‘just look at me. If I can do it so can you!’ I don’t mind telling them that I left school as soon as I could, that the school had written me off, that I had my son when I was of rather young! I share quite a lot with them really, and when they’re flagging it’s what they need to hear.

(Initial teacher interview, Business studies teacher)

There was only a single instance of a teacher expressing a positive view of secondary schools, and typically teachers were aghast at the low levels of basic skills which many students has after eleven years of compulsory schooling:

Well, shouldn’t somebody have been listening to them for the last sixteen years? And they’re not, they’re not listened to. Lots of schools do – the lower and average achievers - a disservice and I think that’s not just here. That's widespread. ... they could have achieved more at school. And really they were allowed to flounder; that’s sad. And I think it’s a reflection across the board.

(Initial teacher interview: Bronwen L, College B)

Though there was some commendation of school by students, these voices were far fewer than the critical ones and were far less strongly expressed. While F summarised it simply: ‘If they're friendly they give you more confidence’ (F, College B, Focus group), and it was perceived that the ‘adult’ relationship extended to learning and teaching situations:

You are allowed to like have a lot more say in like, it's not like in high school you weren't allowed an opinion, they are telling you this and this is what is right and you can't like, at college you are allowed to have like have your own opinion and as long as like you don't offend anyone else but, I much prefer college.

(Helen C, 17, AS levels, College C, Interview)

On emotional labour...

At interview and in their learning journal entries, teachers described the emotional struggles and range of positive and negative emotions they experience. These emotions provide evidence of the complex relationship of teaching and caring: irritation and frustration with students, who arrived late, who are ill equipped or who have not brought in their coursework and who have missed submission dates; sadness about those who drop out or experience tragedy, health scares or personal, domestic difficulties and joy at how individuals respond to encouragement and demonstrate achievement or progress.

Emotional labour may involve faking, enhancing and/or suppressing emotions to modify one's emotional expressions ( Hochschild, 1983). When emotions are underplayed, overplayed neutralised or changed in order to advance educational goals teachers perform ‘emotional labour’ ( Hargreaves, 1999). Hochschild ‘s (1983) work is well recognised for its analysis of the ways employees ‘perform’ emotions in the workplace and how these emotions are often commodified for organisational profit. She also used the term ‘emotion management’ to describe how individuals control and manage their emotions to make sure they are expressed in a way that is consistent with social norms or expectations. Such management becomes
emotional labour because emotion becomes ‘processed, standardised and subject to hierarchical control’ (Hochschild, 1983 p 153).

Teachers’ day to day interactions involve them in emotional labour. In their dealings with challenging students and to diffuse difficult classroom situations, teachers displayed tolerance, often feigned amusement and (re) acted in ways which belied their real feelings. Akin to the ever smiling easy-jet cabin attendant, at times they had to grit their teeth, fix their smile and respond calmly even in the face of rude and crude behaviour. This is exemplified in the following account.

Fieldnote extract: Level 1 key skills session with Social Care students, College C

[…] CA asks for quiet and speaks loudly from the front of the class reminding the girls that “we all should all be working on MODE, MEDIAN and RANGE using the data on children’s height.” She tours the inside U of tables stopping to repeat and remind individuals what tasks they are doing, she physically flicks through their files and locates relevant sheets for them. There is much 1 to 1 tuition going on and she is repeating the same advice every 2 minutes or so. Having explained to 3 different girls that “for the median we have to put the figures all in order etc” she goes to the white board and with a blue marker pen and neat print she re-explains it using figures from a sheet. About 4 girls tune in but there is a lot of noise and calling out from others: “I need a calculator!” “Who’ll loan me a calc?” “I dunno what I’m supposed to be doing here, I’m totally f**ked –sorry I mean lost!” CA diplomatically chooses not to hear the foul language [from Donna] but swiftly moves out into the U of tables and returns to the 1 to 1 teaching again. She crouches down on her haunches so that she is at the same eye level as the student she is helping and uses her hands and fingers to help explain and find halfway points, “Look, watch my fingers 65, 66, 67, 68 see, so half way is 66.5 isn’t it?” The individual student grasps it and CA moves on to a girl two seats away who has been calling repeatedly, “me next Charlotte! Come and show me!” Two thirds of the students refuse to be taught collectively and engage in incessant social chatter. Donna, when not describing what she did with her boyfriend—“prick like a donkey” etc.—last night, sings the verses of the carol “Little Donkey” much to the amusement of her mates “Can somebody gag her?” An occasional Ssh and firm stare from CA has only a temporary effect. Eventually, the teacher visits Donna and looks at her completed tasks, praise follows: “Lovely, your file is super Donna, would you like to show it to Jane?” Donna is on her feet in seconds to join me and seems delighted to talk me through the meticulously presented file, well indexed and each sheet protected with a plastic pocket. The student chatter and calling out for teacher help continues but we are all relieved from the tawdry version of the “Little Donkey” song! After about 10 mins and another tour of the those who demand help, CA rejoins us and tells me how pleased she is with Donna’s coursework file. “When are you gonna show it to the staff? You said you’d take it in” Donna demands boldly. Extending the compliment again CA speaks to us both explaining, “Yes, because Donna’s file is beautifully presented its going forward as a sample late after Christmas.” She then offers the glowing girl the chance to begin some new extra task sheets and Donna is out of her seat ready to find them in the box file. […] Later CA explains that Donna needs “a gently, gently approach; she is volatile, has a mouth like a sewer and needs careful handling”.

Commitment to their learners is such that the majority of teachers work with students well beyond the allotted course timetabled hours. Extensive use of one-on-one teaching both
within timetabled classes and beyond them occurred in all sites. Teachers, in the spirit of optimising the students’ formal results, accepted numerous draft submissions of coursework and many were weary of the slow pace at which students built incrementally on the formative feedback. 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 (see Salisbury et al., 2006a).

At all seven campuses we were told by teachers that college work is ‘driven by the numeric data’ with middle managers having to regularly undertake "curriculum area audits by subject". Teachers felt strongly that ‘grappling with the data prevents you from preparing for teaching!’ Some teachers explained how they were compelled to "break down the raw figures to show the truth" and better illustrate the if and when of participation, completions and qualification patterns in their courses. Welsh funding regimes were viewed as punitive and the Estyn inspection framework was perceived as not best serving the diverse client groups being served by FE. Changes in the qualification framework, the embedding of the Welsh baccalaureate were but a few of the challenges listed by our teachers who expressed mixed feelings:

The job is exciting - it doesn't stay still! On a five-year basis NVQ is overturned! The first Dips.[ diplomas] are now back and we have turned full circle again. Never a dull moment in FE.

(Engineering teacher)

I love my work in the classroom. I love teaching my students, but I get very stressed out with paperwork - having to revamp, rewrite stuff. It seems like change for change's sake.

(Social care teacher)

On complex lives…

Taking the different data sources together, we continue to be struck by the complex lives that young and older students lead and their accounts and our observations continue to remind us that for them, being at college and following courses of study is only a part of their wider lives. Even in our relatively small sample of students we came across those who had been in and out of prison, the birth and loss of a child, being thrown out of home, and living independently. In describing their often chequered school histories, current situations and aspirations some students disclosed rather private rationales for coming to college and revealed difficulties in their off-campus lives:

Why am I here? I’m here to show my mother’s boyfriend that he has got me wrong!

(Howard R, 17, ND in Computing)

I want to show my family that I can turn out okay. My Mum especially… They have all been so behind me and getting pregnant in school caused them such a lot of stress- especially my Mum. I want to prove myself and show her...

(Emma J. 17, AS levels in Business, Sociology & English)
Our principal field researcher worker came across numerous incidents that directly impacted on day-to-day college life and the learning that went on. Three cases of student fatality, two cases of sex in the bushes and an instance of physical assault in the classroom. On a more routine basis there were numerous interruptions from urgent mobile phone calls and texts relaying for example, the heart attack of a student’s mother, the news of an absent class mate’s positive pregnancy test! Details of students’ wider lives thus came into the classroom with them. In turn, teachers are acutely aware of, on the one-hand, the need to strive for improving students’ results and, on the other, the need to cater for and scaffold the wider realities of their learners’ lives.

Several teachers described relationships in which students reveal a great deal to them. Teachers accept this as part of their job and intervene offering help or sometimes bringing in the counselling service or arranging medical referrals. One teacher described ‘horrendous personal situations which she would rather not know about’:

I mean this year I guess, a lot of my students say have got some big problems – they’ve come from backgrounds, they’ve got alcoholic mothers, they’ve got – one of my students her mother was murdered. One of my students – a lot of them have had abuse, sexual abuse and whatever. It just goes on, you know, and I've got lots of asylum seekers. I've got one girl – who has three times recently, she has stopped her mum from killing herself. I've got students who – well one student her dad has just gone to prison for attempted murder of her uncle you know.

(Interview, Charlotte Anning, Key skills teacher, College C)

We have one seventeen year old couple who are parents to two children. As well as studying ‘full-time’ each also has a part-time job, they prudently manage their allowances and ‘get through college’ by buying Tesco’s value food! Numerous young ‘full-time’ students work endless hours in ‘part-time’ jobs clocking up to 44 hours a week. For some this was to fund their independent living and enabled them to be a student. For others who lived at home this gave them an enviable disposable income. In turn, we detected on the part of some of our students a contradiction between their accounts of being a student and their aspirations for bettering themselves. Coming to college is seen by most 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. Many younger students openly told us that they came to college but did little or no study out of this time. Older, part-time students seemed to be much more driven, especially when on courses related to gaining more job related qualifications, such as accountancy. Those on day release from employers, however, were much more of a mixed bunch and described their approach to college course work as “doing just enough, just in time!”

Without going into any close detail here, teachers’ lives are also often complex and clearly their biographic and domestic circumstances can impact upon energy levels and orientations to routine work. Amongst our core teacher sample there has been emergency and radical surgery, miscarriage, unsuccessful IVF treatment, pregnancy, death of parents, illness of child, diagnosis of terminal illness, household moves or reorganisation to facilitate care of elderly parents and other health and family issues. Eleven of our teachers were also enrolled on academic courses including BEd degrees, In-service PGCEs, Masters programmes, OU Diplomas and Welsh for Adults. Undertaking routine teaching duties and having to respond to
college management or Awarding Body imperatives whilst juggling outside responsibilities, obligations and pressures often led to stress and feelings of frustration. Three teachers have requested reduced contracts to 0.8 during the lifespan of our research project.

On locality and learning...

As we read through teacher transcripts and, to an extent supported by observational data, we were faced with the possibility of there being a relationship between localities and learning. It appeared that some teachers hold preconceived views about the localities in which their students live together with assumptions about their dispositions towards learning. Akin to labelling and the self-fulfilling prophecy, locality is taken as a more generalised surrogate for more established socio-economic indicators. Thus, some teachers talked about where students came from and their levels of ability compared with students from other localities and, in turn, about how approaches to learning and teaching were modified. Some teachers held particularly strong sets of assumptions about the nature of their learners in relation to their localities. For example, one teacher was contrasting two sites of the college at which she worked:

The culture is very different in X. No, I'm not really speaking out of turn, am I? The culture in X, when I say working class, that's yes, working class I think and well if you get a job, any job (whereas) I think Y is more rural and the students appear to want, I won't say a career but a job with prospects as opposed to a job... Greater aspirations, definitely... because the opportunities are restricted, that's why they appreciate they need to get a little bit further

(Initial Teacher Interview data)

When asked to compare students from other colleges at which he had taught, a teacher at another college made a similar point:

Similar. No - no difference, no difference really. I mean you get a mixture. The - the approach, the attitude, there – they're similar, yeah. I - you know, and I - I don’t know, there’s a – I think you can see the difference in - in the individuals perhaps if you – if you look at the sort of cultural background, you know, the lads living in the valley areas have a different, different culture to those who live in – perhaps in the city of Newport. The city lads are – are totally typecast, the people – you know, the city lads are more confident, far more vocal whereas the valley lads are still vocal in their own way but there – there's less confidence in – in their ability. So you know, you – you see that. And again, whereas if you genuinely have different backgrounds, different cultures from the different learners. And that comes through. You can sort of see, you know, what – what sort of a -

Interviewer: Well, presumably at (College X) you’ve got slightly more of a mix?

It's probably similar actually. At (College X) you’ve got the - the sort of values of (the local town) you’ve got your Maesteg valleys. And then you’ve got the sort of – the (local town) area if you like, a sort of range. But with – with the (College Y), it's a bigger area. And you’ve got the – the (local town), then you’ve got (another local town) and then you’ve got obviously the – the valley areas round here. So
they tend to be some of each here. Again, different – different ways of dealing with large groups and smaller groups. Depends on – on the mix you get really. And every area is different. Every area is different. You get good and bad, old and young, you know, it – it’s a case of having to – having to – to work on what sort of mix you’ve got and then get the best out of it from them.....

(Initial Teacher Interview)

Some teachers talked about how the way they viewed their students impacted on their teaching:

...when you get classes where the students are rather disparate and they don’t really associate themselves with others in the group, it doesn’t - the results tend to be worse or the - not just results but it tends to be - the atmosphere tends to be worse. Their punctuality tends to be worse. The fact they’re not doing so work - so much work. That tends to happen as well.

So I do a variety of different styles. And I mean it obviously depends upon the urgency of the time of the year as well. If I’m behind in what I’m teaching, I have to do more teaching exposition than I would like. At other times of the year when I’ve got more time which is generally in the autumn term, especially with the AS, I do more group work with them. And they will probably tell you that as well. And then in the latter part when I’ve got less time I have to do more teaching exposition but I think both are valid. I don’t think there’s one right way of doing it and there’s no wrong way of doing it. I think it depends what you want and – and what you want to achieve and what the kids are like that you’ve got in front of you as well. If you’ve got lots of misbehaved kids then you want to have teacher-centred lessons. You know, but you’ve got to use a variety of different approaches. But sometimes you use the same approach for one class; it will work very well and another class it won’t work at all.

It might be that in the reconfiguration of some colleges, the separation of higher status 'academic' and lower status 'vocational' programmes, often separated by their different location implicitly reinforces teachers' conceptions and constructs of their learners. Moreover, the message this separation relays to teachers about their own status was evident. For example, in one striking field note account:

Deb Polgaise introduced me to some colleagues from the Gen. Ed. faculty in the staffroom kitchen area. "I've told Jane that we're all just pond life here at [campus name]!" At her suggestion I gave a quick thumbnail sketch of the project and its intention to capture the realities for teachers and students in FE. A couple of them remembered having read our project details on the College intranet and one of them – a Law teacher - said, "It's about time someone did some decent research on this campus!" Eeking out my cup of coffee, I queried the "pond life" simile with them. What followed was a proxy for a group therapy session; three of them poured out their discontents, anxieties and complaints. I listened to their descriptions of needy learners, low literacy and numeracy ; of staff here only having four hours a week in which to teach AS and A2 subjects; of them servicing local school pupils in twilight teaching slots, of difficult relationships with local school 6th form teachers who criticised them to pupils enrolled on college provision.
Their sense of their campus being “a poor relation”, “an also-ran, “a pain for management because results are poor and drop out high” was strong. Being “geographically out on a limb” and positioned in a socio economically disadvantaged area made their work hard. They were clearly unhappy at their AS and A2 exam results being compared with those from a sister campus noted for excellence, “but serving a completely different type of learner from very different catchments!”. Morale amongst the Gen. Ed. Faculty was claimed as being “very low” by these three teachers who clearly felt vulnerable, unvalued and aggrieved.

(Field note extract, College A)

On learning outcomes: privileging the ‘wider benefits of learning’…

We have been drawn to the ways in which being in post-compulsory education and training contributes to what is commonly termed as the ‘wider benefits of learning’. For example, older learners presented diverse motivational accounts yet there was a strong sense at interviews of both full time and part time students seeing their time in FE in a focused and purposeful way. Older students claimed to be compensating for earlier, missed opportunities as a means to ‘credentialise’ and many saw this as a key benefit along with increasing their confidence. Younger learners often claimed that the main benefits are ‘making new friends’ or ‘having more free time than in school’. Their teachers maintain that the younger students struggle to balance study against wider social lives. Our analysis of learning journals revealed just how little ‘college work’ students report. For teachers and students alike the benefits accruing to college study are much more than obtaining formal qualifications. Without exception, all student accounts revealed a positive perception that studying at college could change and improve their lives. The belief in the transformative capacity of FE to enhance an individual’s labour market position, increase earning power, raise standards of living and quality of life was widely held. Across all campuses, course types and ages the mantra that ‘credentials will cash out’ prevailed! Despite the challenges of difficult or busy wider lives students displayed an optimism about their imagined futures.

The majority of our teachers recognised that formal learning outcomes like qualifications and securing a job were important, but equally important were things like the enjoyment of a subject. A number of our teachers reported that their main aim was to promote enjoyment in their classrooms.

A few listed some of their teaching and learning strategies in which they strived for active learner engagement. However, a powerful impression that we both took away from all interviews, was that the teachers seemed to find it difficult to discuss learning; they didn’t appear to have the vocabulary to talk about learning with ease. There was a skirting around some of the interview questions and a tendency to displace this topic with more pressing narratives or their responses to local and national policies. Clearly, a fuller analysis of our observational fieldwork inside these teachers’ classrooms will enable us to verify and triangulate the verbal accounts of their practices and enable us to re-visit the learning issue.
On the ‘learning journey’…

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. Similarly, it has become clear that transitions are not events nor pivotal turning points, but prolonged and complex processes. Thus, our notion of a learning journey is more akin to an adventure, or a personal voyage of discovery.

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.

Concluding remarks

Our research continues to explore the nature of the outcomes for learners by tracking the ‘journeys’ of students and teachers over a two year period. Whereas observational work focuses on further education settings such as classrooms, workshops, open learning centres and other sites of learning and teaching, the design and use of interviews and journals allows us to explore the interaction of the lived experiences both inside and outside the immediate college setting and how they shape each other. This is to recognise that learning outcomes, which we conceptualise as a product of the social interactions of students and teachers, are
situated not just in the institutional contexts of colleges and policy frameworks but also in the nature of students’ and teachers’ lives.

The experiences we recount are not unusual. They help to reveal and aid understanding of the complexities of individual colleges and the further education sector as a whole. Our experience has taught us much about the nature of colleges of further education as organisations and the people that work and learn in them. To date, our entry into the field has already yielded fresh insights into the world that is Welsh FE. Our data collection strategies, designed to ‘bring us up close’ to learners and their teachers, we hope will shed further light on what it means to be a participant in further education in three different localities in Wales.

Briefly, from our early emergent findings, we draw attention to the following.

- In Wales the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) is committed to reforming 14 – 19 education through the implementation by 2010 of Learning Pathways 14-19, one of the most significant of the Assembly’s ‘Made in Wales’ policies (Davidson, 2004). It has been recognised that reform of this kind comprises three inter-related strands: governance and accountability, curriculum and qualifications reform, and institutional arrangements (Hodgson and Spours, 2005: 1-2). The latter two, in particular, will require close collaboration or joint working between schools and colleges and will re-shape the patterns of transition from those presently experienced by young people as they move from school to further education at the age of 16. This specific policy context sharpens the significance of our findings in relation to, for example: (i) the negative attitudes of FE teachers to school and the implication of these for undermining stronger school/college collaboration; (ii) the benefits to some young people of the chance to make a ‘clean break’ with school and experience a ‘fresh start’, and; (iii) the opportunity thus afforded to teachers and students to shape more expansive learning cultures, and the management of and support for transitions.

- If we are serious about people engaging in life-long learning, learners need to be given at least some of the resources to facilitate this. How, for example, can a 17 year-old, so-called ‘full-time’ student be expected to engage fully in her studies when she works a 44 hour week to sustain herself?

- In terms of the wider contexts impacting particularly on what teachers do, we have asserted that teachers, (and managers), live under the ‘long shadow of incorporation’. Further analysis of our data supports our previously stated view that the majority of teachers continue to relate to the impacts of new managerialism and work intensification, to how this shapes and constrains what they do in their working lives, and some have also related to the impacts on their private lives such as the levels of stress and anxiety which they take home.

- As yet, therefore, we suggest that the changing political context in post-devolution Wales is yet to make a substantial mark on the sector (see Jephcote and Salisbury, Welsh Journal of Education, Summer 2007). Moreover, we suspect that some of the
necessary conditions for the successful implementation of some current initiatives relating to the re-shaping of 14-19 education in Wales are not yet in place. For example, our findings strongly point to a critical stance on the part of students and teachers in further education about prior experiences of schooling, yet new policies are predicated on collaboration and partnership. All of this points to the need for much bridge building yet to be done.

- Too much emphasis on reconfiguring a 14 to 19 phase may lose sight of and give insufficient thought to its concomitant issues such as teacher training and supply and staff development. Moreover, this dominant focus may well be at the cost of giving more attention to the wider body of learners that characterise the further education student population. It is perhaps timely that the Minister’s promise -made on October 26th 2006 (see Dysg, 2006)- of a thoroughgoing policy review of the mission and purpose of the further education sector in Wales is already underway.

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