The changing world of non-traditional learners at the University Centre Hastings (UK)

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This roundtable discussion will introduce a small piece of research that is currently being undertaken by two adult educators working part-time at the University Centre Hastings (UCH). Qualitative research methods are used to explore the initial and ongoing learning experiences of first year undergraduates, from non-traditional learning backgrounds. These learners are enrolled on a B.A. (Honours) degree in Applied Social Science.

The research explores new students’ expectations, motivations, previous and ongoing learning experiences, including barriers to, and facilitators of learning. The intention is to consider practical outcomes in terms of suggested support for learners and staff at UCH. Broader aims are to develop an understanding of the complexity of learners’ experiences, to situate these within the contested arena of educational discourse and to develop practice-based research.

Complexity theory recognises that knowledge is not created in a vacuum and that concrete experience needs to be located within the context in which meaning is constructed (Haggis, 2008). This discussion paper attempts to outline the context and circumstances in which this research is conducted, with a degree of reflexivity, to summarise some of the emerging findings and to raise issues for discussion.

Context

UCH is managed by the University of Brighton, situated approximately 40km away, and is located in the coastal town of Hastings, East Sussex. Despite being in the prosperous south east of England, East Sussex experiences the highest levels of deprivation of all counties with the most significant levels concentrated in its coastal towns (ESiF 2009). The multiple deprivation index, 2007, indicates that fifteen of the 327 super output areas (SOAs) in East Sussex fall within the 10% most disadvantaged SOAs in England. Of these, fourteen are in Hastings (ESCC March 2009).

1 For the purpose of this study: aged 21+
3 Seven factors are measured by deprivation indices: low incomes, lack of work, poor health, poor housing, access to services, crime, poor living environment (ESiF 2009).
4 Super output areas (SOAs) contain around 1,500 people (ESiF 2009).
University Centre Hastings was established in 2003 with an aim of promoting education-led regeneration. Given the centre’s remit, it is useful to look at its work and to consider whether it is attracting the so-called ‘hardest to reach’ people, with few or no qualifications, that live in the most deprived local neighbourhoods.

At the time of writing (spring 2010) the UK’s current New Labour government is in its thirteenth year of office, and the nation is now in the second year of an economic recession. The private sector and the public sector have seen employment contract and the latter faces government spending cuts. Government has frozen the number of funded places in higher education institutions (HEIs). This represents a real cut in income for universities and ends the current expansion of the higher education system. New Labour has taken a persistently technical, and according to some, narrow view of what is now termed the lifelong learning sector (includes higher, further and adult education). Some argue that his view reduces learning to a set of ‘skills and knowledge’ that individuals acquire and that government believes will drive economic productivity (Coffield, 2006). It is within this context and this construction of the aims and available forms of education for adults, that the research participants form their expectations of higher education.

Research process and participants
This work in progress consists of two rounds of one-to-one, semi-structured life-histories interviews with seven learners. The first round of interviews were conducted in the first two weeks of the degree course, September / October 2009, and the second round is taking place at the time of writing: March / April 2010.

Both researchers are experienced adult educators, one male, one female, from different subject disciplines, whose work has mainly consisted of teaching in the lifelong learning sector. Both work part-time and one is semi-retired. The work is defined by researchers as agents and ‘the researched’ as fairly passive participants (albeit self-selecting). Unequal power-relationships exist where the researchers are staff of the University of Brighton, which manages UCH, and the participants are new students.

One research participant is male and all are aged between twenty-four and forty. The male : female ratio echoes the student cohort for the current year’s intake where there are approximately 26 female: 4 male students. The one male research participant is also a former asylum seeker from overseas. All others are British and all reside in Hastings. Five of the seven participants have dependent children and none have previously enrolled in a higher education degree course. Some gained direct entry to UCH and others came via an access course at the local college of further education.

Some initial findings
Against the outlined context of this research, several findings are emerging. For the purpose of this discussion the focus here is on research participants’ motivation and backgrounds.

All participants had endured significant disruption to their school education as a result of non-school related difficulties such as parental separation, drug abuse, domestic violence, being taken into care. Strikingly, participants expressed positive feelings around education ‘I really loved the experience of secondary school, it was really nice’ (Bella).
I can remember when I first day at school, quite clearly. (Oh, do you?) Yeah, I was sick [laughter]. I was so excited. I couldn’t wait to start school. I loved it and I loved primary school. Cried when I left. Loved it. (Linda).

This positive view was reinforced where school offered an escape from the difficulties endured at home, ‘I did really well, and I really enjoyed it. I think of lot of that was because it was a relief from the home,’ (Barbara).

The chaos of life outside school led most to leave education prematurely (before the age of sixteen, in the UK) and all left compulsory education without going on to the post-compulsory sector.

You know my home life wasn’t really very good, my step-dad was quite violent and all sorts of stuff like that, so our home life really wasn’t that great… and I think, you know, when you just want out… really, in fairness, if my home life had been different I probably would have stayed in education (Linda).

As might be expected amongst those who have striven to get into higher education, there is a sense of agency and capacity for change, albeit individualised rather than social change. Aims are expressed in economic and social terms.

You sometimes hit that crossroads, sometimes don’t you, and it’s like, is this actually what I want out of my life? I’ve got two children … my daughter’s now in nursery and my son at school, and I had to think, what kind of career would I like? … at the end of it all, I’d end up with the chance of getting a better paid full time job … if you’re working part time you’re unlikely to go for promotions and things like that, you’re not going to progress within a company, like if you get a job working part time you kind of get stuck in that whole minimum wage struggle aren’t you? (Linda).

Family members feature significantly as motivators or brakes on education. Jean wanted to prove her capability to mother who she felt had stopped her from going to university direct from school. The notion ‘to better myself’ raised issues of status for Gina, as well as a desire to be a ‘better provider’ and a role model for her children.

[1st husband] He was violent, he was horrid… absolutely horrid, and er…you know, …. I was quite ashamed of myself, umm… and I just thought, you know, I’d had these kids, they’re my responsibility, and I’ve got to be the one, you know, to show them right from wrong, you know, and show that they can make something of their lives, you know? …. Several of my friends are on benefits or are carers. I used to be a mobile carer for four and a half years, but I wanted better of myself than … cleaning people up. And I then went from that to being a taxi driver, but I want to be better. I want to break out of the cycle for my children (Gina).

Discussion
These initial findings are far from complete. There is a tension between the degree to which participants’ spoken (quoted) words are left untouched, to ‘speak for themselves’, and the imposed analysis. It would be helpful to discuss how to embrace complexity and maintain the richness of people’s lived experiences, expressed in their own words. Another consideration is how to avoid the tendency to reduce differences and stress similarities, rather than allowing particularities to
emerge. In considering the above quotes, where some are short and other extracts are lengthy, we might consider what is gained or lost through the process.

It would be useful to identify other comparable, informative studies of 'non-traditional learners' in higher education. More broadly, from such a small sample, to consider what might be said about UK adult education in higher education, that links it in a meaningful way to the broader context of educational discourse. This relates to the rather more pragmatic consideration of how the work might be used or developed and for what purposes.

References

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