Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education

ESRC Research Report (abbreviated version)

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This is an edited version of the final report to ESRC for the Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLC) project. This project was part of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The ESRC award number was L139251025. The ESRC requires a short final report of a maximum of 5,000 words. This pamphlet reproduces the bulk of that report, where the objectives, methods and results of the research are presented. We have omitted the section which details activities and outputs. The report refers to five annexes or appendices. Here we have only included one – annex 4 – which presents the details about a new approach to managing the improvement of learning in Further Education, through Principles of Procedure.

Acknowledgement

The five co-directors of the TLC are named at the head of this page. However, this Report is based upon the work of a larger research team, all of whom have contributed significantly to it. The others are Graham Anderson, Helen Colley, Jennie Davies, Kim Diment, Wendy Maull, Tony Scaife, Michael Tedder, Madeleine Wahlberg, and Eunice Wheeler.

Further Information

Further information about the TLC project, including publications, can be found on the project website: www.ex.ac.uk/sell/tlc. This can also be accessed via the TLRP website: www.tlrp.org.
Background

The Transforming Learning Cultures in FE (TLC) was ground-breaking, as no similar research had been done within the FE sector. The research drew on four main bodies of literature: situated learning (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991); the learning careers of young people (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000); the professionality of FE staff (Gleeson and Shain, 1999); and the conceptual frameworks developed by Bourdieu (Grenfell and James, 1998). We planned the research to establish the extent to which learning is cultural and relational.

Objectives

(i) To determine the nature of learning cultures and their impact upon students' and teachers' learning in FE.

Achieved.

(ii) To establish a theoretical base for understanding the inter-relationships between learning cultures, learning, and situational and motivational factors in FE.

Achieved.

(iii) To identify principles of procedure for the enhancement of learning cultures in order to improve student and teacher learning and achievement.

Achieved.

(iv) To determine the effectiveness, within prescribed limits, of different intervention strategies for the enhancement of learning cultures and the improvement of learning.

In the light of research evidence, this was expanded to cover the impact of interventions that undermined effective learning. Once that was done, this also was achieved.

(v) To set in place an enhanced and lasting practitioner-based research capability in FE.

This was largely unachieved, but the research revealed the cultural reasons for the failure (See ‘results’ below).
Methods

This project was methodologically innovative in three ways:

1) The large core research team of 14 included staff from FE colleges and universities
2) The research combined qualitative and quantitative case study data in an iterative way
3) The project developed ways of analysing vast quantities of data – over 600 interviews, over 150 observations, 16 tutor log books, 1043 returned questionnaires, numerous notes from meetings and workshops.

The research was a partnership between four universities and four FE colleges. Five university researchers were halftime, and four FE researchers were seconded for two days per week. With five project directors, this gave a core team of 14 who met regularly in residential workshops. This mixed team ensured that the research was within, not just about, FE. Partnership working added insights to the research process and subjected our findings to ongoing rigorous critical assessment.

We examined 16 FE learning sites in depth for a three-year period. One site was followed for one year and, because the tutor changed jobs was replaced by a site that was followed for two years, giving 17 in all. The sites were selected in consultation with the colleges and tutors. We sought to achieve a balanced cross-section rather than a representative sample. One tutor in each site worked as a participating tutor in the project, with paid remission of 2 hours per week. These tutors were regularly interviewed and kept personal log-books, which they shared with the research team. The sites were observed several times a year by different people, including tutors observing each other. Observations were unstructured to give general impressions of learning in the site. Six students were interviewed twice a year, in each site. For two year courses, this gave an overall sample of 12 students, because we picked up two cohorts. For 1 year courses, we followed 3 cohorts, with a sample of 18. For shorter courses, the sample was larger. All interviews were semi-structured. Twice a year we administered a questionnaire survey to all students in each learning site (see annex 1). Completion rates varied from site to site: in all but one, the response rate to initial questionnaires was greater than 80%; the rate for exit questionnaires varied from 48% to 72%. In two sites we abandoned survey work because of collection difficulties. In the entry-level drama course the students had to be helped to fill the answers in, and it became clear that there was no certainty that the answers accurately represented their perceptions. The other was an English for Speakers of Other Languages group, who found completing the questionnaire difficult and stressful. (Sampling and data collection are more fully explained in Hodkinson and James, 2003.)
The prime unit of analysis was the learning site. We began by building up detailed descriptive case studies of the learning culture in each site. In addition, we developed accounts of the learning careers of several students and tutors. In moving beyond the descriptions, we analysed each site against what we termed a learning cultures instrument (annex 2), and an interventions instrument (annex 3).

The use of these interpretative instruments allowed us to pull together a picture of similarities and differences between site learning cultures, and to make sense of the different types of intervention and the impacts they had on learning in each site. These two macro-analyses were interlocked (Hodkinson et al., 2005).

The quantitative data fed into these processes at all stages. It helped locate our sites in FE as a whole, to compare the views of our interviewees with the views of other students in the sites, to look for similarities and differences across the sites as a whole, and to identify change. This required a range of inferential techniques. For example, paired sample t tests were used to map change in scores over the period of students’ engagement in a site and to compare students’ initial expectations with the outcomes they felt they had achieved. Analysis of Variance (with post-hoc comparisons) was used to identify groups of sites such that sites within any one group were similar with respect to a given variable, but there were significant differences between the different groups. Cluster analysis was used to identify groups of students in the same way. The distribution of the different groups across the sites was then explored. Factor analysis was used to explore the dimensionality of the scales used in the questionnaire. The results of these inferential techniques were interpreted in a non-inferential way: the criterion of statistical significance was used simply to distinguish results worthy of further investigation from results that could be regarded as ‘noise’; statistical significance was not used to claim generalisability of the findings to a population. In other words, results were interpreted in the same way as our qualitative findings: they were assumed to relate to the particular sites and to the particular times at which the data were collected (This methodology and some of the results are discussed in Postlethwaite & Maull, 2003).

Almost 3 years into the project we modified the final stage. In the original bid, under pressure from the TLRP Steering Committee, we planned a final evaluative stage, returning to the sites to see if teaching interventions had been sustained. The constant pressure on tutors, the continually changing pressures on sites and the relational nature of learning in FE (see below), rendered this inappropriate. Instead, we conducted a genealogy of prevalent notions of learning and the improvement of learning in the UK FE sector, over the last 30 years. This entailed the critical examination of 343 published texts, mainly from the ‘grey’ policy and practice literature. This helped determine the extent to which our findings reflected the immediate contemporary state of FE, or were more deeply rooted in the traditions of the sector.
Results

**Understanding Learning in FE**

The research confirmed the cultural nature of learning in FE and allowed us to develop a new theory of learning cultures and learning (Hodkinson et al. (forthcoming) nominated publication 1). We distinguish a learning culture from a learning site, and any site where learning takes place can be understood to have a learning culture. We define a learning culture not as the environment in which people learn, but as the social practices through which people learn. Such practices are constituted by the actions, dispositions and interpretations of the participants, which means that learning cultures exist in and through communication and interaction. Cultures are (re)produced by individuals, just as much as individuals are (re)produced by cultures, but the degree to which individuals can influence the culture in which they participate is unequal. Cultures are both structured and structuring, and individuals’ actions are neither totally determined by the confines of a learning culture, nor are they totally free. This cultural understanding of learning draws attention to the significance of power inequalities in FE, in wider society and in individual learning sites. The theory permits the integration of individual and sociological views of learning, without either becoming subordinate to the other. Also, this view of learning draws attention to the fact that what counts as good learning is socially constructed and contested. In every learning site we encountered multiple variations of learning, some of which would be widely judged to be beneficial, some of which would be widely judged to be harmful. Thus, it might be good that the nursery nurses were effective practitioners, but bad that they learnt to accept their position in highly gendered work with low status and low pay. In psychology, some were obviously successful. Others learned that they were incapable, and lost confidence. It therefore is important to make two different but related judgements about learning in any site – the first about value or desirability and the second about effectiveness.

A cultural understanding of learning implies that learning is not simply occurring in a social context, but is to be understood as a social practice. Such practices are influenced by factors inside and outside the actual site where learning takes place. In our context, these included the FE college as an organization, employer organizations with which there were formal or informal relations, awarding bodies, various quangos and the policies and actions of the DfES. Learning cultures are relational, so that no one factor is prime above all others.

Students and tutors learn through participation in the learning cultures of the sites where they belong. Their learning is formal and informal (Hodkinson and Colley, 2005). Put differently, through their engagement in learning, each student (or tutor) engages in a process of becoming. This is most obvious for fulltime students. Thus, a number of working class young women became nursery nurses (Colley, In Press). It can also be applied to part-time students – even
those on the distance-learning basic computer skills course, who became more competent in IT through the course. Learning as becoming entails structure and agency, and Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital and field helped make sense of our data.

Each learning site had a learning culture that was significantly different from the others. This was because the influencing factors and their interrelationships varied. These variations were often considerable. The practices of teaching and learning and the ideas about what counted as ‘good’ learning and ‘good’ teaching differed from site to site, as did the dispositions and intentions of students and tutors. Site learning cultures had differences in practices as well as in values. Consequently interventions that worked in one site might not be appropriate in another.

Learning sites can be grouped according to many different organizing criteria. One example is fulltime vocational sites, and nominated publication 2 (Colley et al., 2003) analyses these in terms of vocational habitus. It was also possible to identify some key aspects of learning culture that were common across the sample. Using these similarities, supported by the genealogy study, we were able to construct a picture of the learning culture of the FE sector as a whole. There are four key features:

(1) The central significance of the tutor in learning. However, there was considerable variation in tutor position. Some were more independent than others and had more social and/or cultural capital and room to manoeuvre. Some were teaching on courses that they had started themselves – others on courses of which they disapproved.

(2) Status and qualification hierarchies. FE (excluding sixth form colleges) has always dealt with students, young and old, looking for a second chance in education. Often these are people for whom schooling has been problematic. These are often working class students and/or those from minority ethnic backgrounds. FE has developed a welcoming ethos and a set of practices to work with such students. However, it is this that leads to its relatively low status compared with school or HE, and this low status permits forms of funding and managerialism that are more extreme than in other education sectors. This status issue impacts on different courses in different ways, often risking detriment for those on lower status routes within the FE portfolio. This is more than the distinction between academic and vocational. There are significant hierarchies within and between vocational qualifications, which affect recruitment, progression and student and tutor identity.

(3) Learning in FE is pressured and destabilized by a combination of inadequate and unstable funding and a rigid audit regime, focused on retention, achievement and OFSTED inspection standards. The result is tutors who spend much of their time striving to protect the existing learning culture from external damage – such
as dramatic reductions in class contact time, imposed register systems that do not fit with patterns of attendance and learning, and tensions between inclusion and high achievement rates. Dealing with this entailed extensive underground working (James and Diment, 2003), with many tutors routinely engaged in working well beyond their job descriptions, simply to keep classes afloat. Our evidence suggests that these pressures increased during the period of the research, with increasingly detrimental effects. Rather than improving learning, such managerial approaches threatened its quality, and tutors were running out of the energy and morale needed to resist them.

(4) **Pressures to improve teaching and learning in FE are primarily externally driven, by concerns other than the nature of teaching and learning.** Over the last 50 years, there have been repeated calls for the improvement of teaching and learning in FE to solve perceived social and moral problems among youth; the inadequacy of VET for employers; insufficient skill levels to ensure the nation’s global competitiveness; and the need for a cost-effective FE service. Beneath these different calls for improvement, lies a basic problem – the demand that the sector provides effective responses to some of the country’s major social, employment and economic needs, but with ever-decreasing resources.

**Tutor Interventions**
We focussed specific attention on actions taken to improve learning, particularly by tutors. The project distinguished between the everyday *mediating and enacting* of learning cultures, and deliberate *interventions* that tutors make. Our work with participating tutors included a series of deliberate attempts to bring about change in the learning culture. We distinguished three types of tutor intervention:

(1) **Interventions for improvement.** These were initiated in a wish to foster better learning, or to maximise student success. They ranged from changes to aspects of teaching to the reorganisation of whole courses. Their success depended in part upon whether they brought about a shift towards greater synergy between various elements of the learning culture.

(2) **Interventions to mitigate negative change.** These were more common than we expected. Typically, sets of strongly held professional values and practices came into conflict with new expectations or requirements (from college managers, funding arrangements, qualification bodies, other stakeholders). The intervention was primarily aimed at maintaining practices, sometimes at considerable cost to the tutor.

(3) **Interventions for ‘exit’.** In the face of what they felt were intolerable or unsustainable circumstances, some tutors intervened to leave the college. Others sought and found new forms of professional sustenance outside college structures.

Tutor interventions of type (1) often brought about improvement, but there were also unintended consequences, and examples where pervasive aspects of
learning cultures prevailed and tutor interventions had little effect. Some tutor interventions were informed by insights from research, including the TLC. However, our findings question some conventional thinking about the use of research by practitioners and also about the nature of improvement, to which we turn next.

**Improving Learning**
Learning cultures are often persistent and many of the determining influences are outside of the control of players within the education system. However, because learning cultures are partly constructed by people there is scope for some significant change through which improvements in learning can be brought about. Some of the improvements necessary in FE require wider issues of social inequality and restrictions of the labour market and employment practices to be addressed. In this project we concentrated on the potential for change inside FE.

We identified four possible drivers for the improvement of learning:

1). **Student interests.** What students in FE want and need is very varied, between and within particular courses. Their FE experience is not simply about passing qualifications and getting a good job – though these were goals for many. Students want to enjoy their learning, and to be able to balance their studies with other personal priorities, be that economic survival, supporting a family, doing an existing job, or sustaining a vibrant lifestyle. To operationalise this force for improvement requires the acknowledgment that sometimes students legitimately want things that policy does not support. It is also necessary to challenge student assumptions and expectations as part of the educative process.

2). **Tutors’ professionalism.** We found dedicated staff, determined to do an excellent job, often in difficult conditions (Gleeson et al., 2005). If this reservoir of tutor experience, altruism and professionalism were recognised and supported, major improvements in learning would follow. This would entail creating more space for tutor autonomy and collaboration, encouraging, rewarding, sustaining and supporting creativity, imagination and innovation, and providing better tutor learning opportunities, including challenging expectations and assumptions. Research done elsewhere in the TLRP on workplace learning is relevant. Tutors need more expansive learning environments at work, including opportunities to step outside the working context and engage with critical thinking – for example through engagement in research or other HE-linked courses and activities (Fuller and Unwin, 2003; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005).

3). **Pedagogy.** Our data supports the view of teaching as an art rather than a technical craft. Though there are some obvious common features of good pedagogy that can be applied almost anywhere, the nature of that application differs significantly between different sites and their learning cultures. Often the good pedagogy we observed did not completely fit the criteria set out for national
standards and inspection, and what worked well for one tutor in one site might not have worked for a different tutor, or on a different site. A greater understanding of and support for excellent pedagogy that is particular to a tutor’s personal approach and professional judgement and that is sensitive to the nature of the particular learning culture, should be combined with staff development that encourages sharing of expertise.

4). Taking a Cultural View of Learning. Though pedagogy, tutor professionalism and student dispositions all strongly influence learning, they need to be considered together with the other factors listed earlier in relation to learning cultures as a whole. Recognising and acting upon this would open up the biggest improvements in learning of all. One finding is that sites where many of the cultural influences are broadly synergistic are likely to produce more effective learning.

Improving learning cultures requires actions by different types of players, including government and other national bodies, college managers (senior and middle), tutors (including the various types of paraprofessional), and ideally students themselves.

Significant changes to the management and funding of FE are vital if improvements are to be made. The sector requires stable and adequate funding, and a form of accountability that avoids the pernicious effects of the audit culture of low-trust accountability. Because of this, and because of the variability and complexity within and between FE learning cultures, it is necessary to develop ways to manage and monitor improvements that do not require either universal approaches or over-reliance on measured outputs. Our objective of producing Principles of Procedure proved to be particularly valuable. We have produced a set of such principles, organised for different potential actors, under four overarching aims (Annex 4). Underpinning these lie six research-supported broader principles about improving learning in FE:

A). Improving learning entails more than increasing its effectiveness. It is important to supplement judgements about learning effectiveness with judgments about the value of learning, and to make issues of effectiveness subordinate to issues of value.

B). There are many different positive learning processes and outcomes, beyond the achievement of a qualification. Different groups and different individuals may appropriately value different things. There is a need to support a diversity of such positive learning, as well as recognising that learning can also be harmful.

C). Improving the effectiveness of learning entails modifying learning cultures, for example by increasing functional synergies and reducing dysfunctional tensions.
D). In enhancing learning cultures, ‘what works’ is often localised and context specific. Attempts to impose rigid standard procedures are often negative rather than positive in effect.

E). Because of D, improving learning in FE entails creating maximum space for localised initiative, creativity and professional judgement, and creating more synergistic cultures to support and reward such initiatives.

F). The improvement of learning requires a reflectively critical understanding at all levels of intervention: government, college, tutor and, where possible, student.

Research Capacity Building

Despite a strong college rhetoric of willingness to engage, we found little evidence of research influencing FE practice, and attempts to use the TLC to expand research capacity were largely ineffective, beyond the membership of the actual team. This is because the culture of FE, with its shortage of resources, constant major changes, and lack of professional space makes engagement with research very difficult. The colleges we worked with have been through mergers, major reorganisations, OFSTED Inspections and serious financial crises. Each of these rendered research activity marginal, though two colleges adopted practices as a direct result of TLC research. The four college-seconded part-time researchers were relatively senior people, working for us for two days a week. We expected this to assist in the penetration of TLC research in the colleges. Rather, it rendered these staff expensive and marginal, and three were made redundant. Across the TLC, only one third of the tutors actively engaged in the project remain in teaching roles in the sector. Two left FE to move into sixth form provision, two have become full-time managers and are no longer teaching, five have either quit or been made redundant from FE, and five give accounts of themselves as marginalised and hoping to leave FE (Colley, et al. 2005). In research linked to the TLC, Goodrham (2005) shows how even those FE staff most committed to taking research seriously find themselves under extreme pressure. (His sample excluded TLC partner colleges, confirming the wider applicability of this finding.)

Thus, though the TLC had a major impact on the participating tutors and a lesser impact on a significant number of FE staff who read our materials or attended our numerous workshops and seminars, it has so far had little overall impact across the sector. However, the findings show how a greater research capacity and a greater engagement with research could be brought about. This requires some of the already identified changes needed to improve learning cultures in FE: spaces and reward for greater tutor professionalism, and a policy and funding context where managers can focus on improving learning, and ways in which research can help with that. TLC findings strongly suggest that research can best make an impact through tutor engagement in it. The still-dominant assumption that
research discovers what works and that such findings should be universally applied by practitioners hinders the effective engagement with research in FE. This is because what works in one context will not work, or not work in the same way, in another. Tutors engage in practice through deeply held and value-laden dispositions. Effective tutor learning entails developing extending and challenging those dispositions, not bolting something new onto them. Research can play a part in helping professional tutors continue to learn.

References


ANNEX 4 to the main report: The Principles of Procedure for Improving Learning in FE

Introduction
In making recommendations for improving learning in FE the TLC project faced two dilemmas. The first is that our research clearly shows that what counts as good learning varies from site to site, so that what works in one site may be inappropriate in another. Secondly, the way of understanding learning as the engagement in cultural practices is at odds with dominant aspects of the current policy and management culture in FE. This judges learning success against pre-specified outcomes – retention and achievement. The findings do not provide any ways in which those outcomes can be universally improved. Rather, they challenge the very idea that learning success in FE can be captured through measured outputs in this way. In order to operationalise these findings, we need a different approach. This takes us back to a debate, in the early 1970s, around what was then termed the ‘aims and objectives’ movement of curriculum development.

Stenhouse (1977) contrasted two forms of managing development, in relation to curriculum design. They were the objectives model, where clear and identifiable outcomes could be safely predicted in advance, and the process model, where outcomes were less predictable, and where several different outcomes could all be legitimate. We take this distinction and apply it to management approaches to the improvement of learning in FE, in a different context from that where Stenhouse was working, and in a modified manner. The dominant form of learning management at the moment is a version of the objectives model. The TLC research shows that, in the context of shortage of resources, it often makes things worse. Our data is consistent with the view that learning outcomes can be varied, that they are often not distinct from the process of learning, that what counts as a suitable outcome is contested, and that many learning outcomes are likely to be judged undesirable. It follows that a process model of management may be more appropriate.

In a process model, rather than specifying the expected outcomes, we specify ongoing approaches to improving learning. That is, we specify the desired processes which, if followed, are more rather than less likely to bring about the types of improvement that are sought. This is done through linking overall aims to more specific principles of procedure. The TLC evidence suggests two different ways of constructing a table of aims and principles of procedure. The first focuses on four drivers for learning improvement: student dispositions and agency, tutor professionalism, pedagogy and cultural enrichment. The second way to classify aims and principles is through the different players who can take action. This list includes students, tutors, college management and national government and government agencies. In England, this would include the DfES, the LSC, OFSTED, FENTO the QCA and a realm of lead examining bodies. There are different ways in which these two approaches can be combined. What we have chosen to do, following the sense of our research evidence, is to arrange aims in relation to each potential driver for improvement, and then cluster principles of procedure within each aim, according to the key players who need to take action. In some cases the same principle occurs for more than one aim, and/or for more than one player. In each category, we commence with principles at the national level, then examine college management, then tutors and finally students. This is because actions lower down the hierarchy are to a very large extent dependent upon a suitable policy and funding climate, established from above. Of course, the multitudes of players involved in learning in FE do not fall neatly into four categories. Rather, we are using those categories of policy maker, manager, tutor and student to...
illustrate the range of types of action needed. In practice, what can actually be done will depend upon the specific circumstances of a player’s position and role. Thus, officers of a particular awarding body have very different scope for action compared with a senior civil servant or a member of the LSC Board. Similarly, college managers vary in level and range of responsibility, and many of them are also tutors. By tutor, we include any member of staff with responsibility for working with students, including the growing army of paraprofessionals.

In understanding the principles of procedure, two things should be kept in mind. The first is that issues of learning value and learning effectiveness are contested and contestable. This means that applying these principles of procedure is itself a contested process. Put differently, operationalising these principles entails abandoning the view that learning and the improvement of learning, are merely technical matters. Secondly, operationisation has to be seen as the art of the possible. The principles are not set out as a blueprint for some unattainable idealised state. However, this does not mean that applying the principles is an inherently conservative act. Rather, for them to be effective, many aspects of the status quo must be challenged.

1. Maximising Student Agency

_Aim 1: To recognise different and changing student interests in learning, and to maximise their opportunities to contribute to their own learning_

**Principles of Procedure**

_Government and national bodies should_

Within the constraints of the social, economic and political context

1.1 continually recognise varied and diverse reasons for studying in FE, within and between different courses, as well as and instead of achieving the target qualification. This principle should guide approaches to inspection and funding, as well as guidelines for management.

1.2 recognise and support the differing interests, aptitudes and approaches of students within and between courses. There are clear implications here for issues such as group size and teacher contact time, as well as the acceptance of varied outcomes, including for some students, leaving a course early. This principle should guide inspection, funding, curriculum design and assessment, as well as approaches to management.

1.3 encourage colleges and tutors to recognise and support varied and changing student dispositions, even within a single course.

1.4 encourage colleges and tutors to make sympathetic judgements about the value of diverse student dispositions and interests in learning.

In our view, taking these principles seriously entails major shifts to the management, inspection and especially resourcing of the FE sector. Catering effectively for diverse student dispositions requires time, expertise, space and support.

**College Management**

Within the parameters of current national policy, management, inspection and funding, and of our own dispositions and resources: college managers should:

1.5 continually recognise varied and diverse reasons for studying in FE, within and between different courses, as well as or instead of achieving the target qualification. This recognition should be reflected in management and monitoring approaches.
encourage tutors and course teams to recognise and support the differing and changing interests and aptitudes of students, in all classes that they teach.

1.7 encourage tutors and course teams to make sympathetic judgements about value of diverse student dispositions and interests in learning.

1.8 provide adequate resources, including time, for the creative and innovative practices of tutors to support diverse and changing student dispositions. There are implications here for contact time and tutor workloads.

**Tutors**

Within the constraints of existing national and college specific approaches to management, inspection and funding, and of our own dispositions and resources, tutors should:

1.9 make efforts to discover and understand the diverse and changing interests and dispositions of students we teach, including those that differ from qualification achievement.

1.10 make sympathetic judgements about the range of learning processes and outcomes that can be legitimately valued and supported.

1.11 support a wide range of different acceptable dispositions and interests, including helping students for whom the target qualification is not the major concern.

1.12 recognise and address potentially negative effects of learning on students, and work to minimise them.

1.13 encourage students to be proactive, creative and innovative in advancing their own learning, and encourage students to engage critically with their expectations.

**Students**

Within the constraints of the college and course, and of other parts of our lives, students should:

1.14 recognise and articulate the positive things that we can realistically hope to get from the course, and monitor changes in those hopes.

1.15 look for ways to maximise the chances of realising those hopes, through our own actions, through relations with other students, and through engagement with the tutor.

1.16 Be creative and innovative in advancing my own learning, as well as that of others.

1.17 Consider the appropriateness of our hopes and actions in relation to other students and to tutors.

2. Maximising Tutor Professionalism

**Aim 2:** To recognise different tutor approaches to teaching and learning, and maximise the opportunities for increased tutor professionalism and creativity.

**Principles of Procedure**

**Government and national bodies**

Within the constraints of the social, economic and political context, government and national bodies should:

2.1 recognise, support and enhance the professionalism and creativity of all FE teaching and management staff, regardless of seniority or status.

2.2 develop policies, with management, inspection and funding regimes that recognise and reward tutor professionalism, creativity and innovation. This should include the recognition that professionalism centres upon expert judgment making, and that different professionals work in different learning contexts and in different ways.
develop policies, approaches and structures that maximise the potential for tutor autonomy, combined with opportunities to learn, to share and to be constructively challenged. Challenges should cover value and purpose, as well as effectiveness.

provide adequate resources and space for professional work by tutors, together with medium term stability of structures, policies, regulation and funding, to encourage professionals to take a strategic view of their work.

College Management
Within the parameters of current national policy, management, inspection and funding, and of our own dispositions and resources, college managers should:
2.5 recognise and support diverse forms of tutor professionalism, creativity and innovation, arising from differences in tutor disposition and the contexts in which they work.
2.6 reward tutor professionalism based on creativity, innovation and expert judgment making.
2.7 provide expansive working environments, where tutors can enhance their professionalism and creativity through mutual learning, exchanging experiences and meeting constructive challenges.
2.8 recognise, develop, support and reward professionalism, creativity, innovation and judgement making in all teaching and management staff, including part-timers, contract staff and teaching technicians.

Tutors
Within the constraints of existing national and college specific approaches to management, inspection and funding, and of our own dispositions and resources, tutors should:
2.9 recognise, develop and challenge our own approaches to teaching and management, including our developing views about what good learning is, in ways that work for us. These might include personal reflection on practice; sharing ideas with and learning from others; seeking new challenges and going on courses.
2.10 Find ways to develop and increase our creativity, imagination, innovation and the quality of our professional judgements.
2.11 recognise and support differing forms of professionalism in our colleagues and contribute to their development. Work with colleagues to establish a climate of professional learning, creativity, improvement and refined judgement making.

Students
It is unlikely that many students will be interested in or able to engage with the enhancement of tutor professionalism. However, where this is feasible there are principles to guide them:
2.12 help tutors understand the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching, where they are receptive to such inputs.
2.13 Respond creatively to learning opportunities and teacher activity
2.14 be politely assertive, if aspects of the learning experience fall short of our needs, whilst striving to understand the constraints within which we and the tutors have to work.
2.15 Do not expect all tutors to work in the same ways, whilst expecting and encouraging each one to do what they can to improve our learning.

3. Improving Pedagogy
Of the four drivers of potential learning improvement, this is the one that already gets most attention. In what follows, therefore, we have concentrated on a small number of more macro
principles of procedure, rather than following so many others in trying to pin down the detail of good teaching approaches. This is because the TLC research shows that effective pedagogy varies significantly from learning culture to learning culture, and from tutor to tutor.

Aim: To improve the value and effectiveness of learning, through the pedagogic practices of tutors

**Principles of Procedure**

**Government and national bodies**
Within the constraints of the social, economic and political context, we should:

3.1 recognising that pedagogy involves value judgments and creativity as well as techniques, and develop systems to encourage and support the identification of a wide range of learning outcomes and processes, together with judgements about their worth, at local as well as at national levels.

3.2 facilitate debate about what forms ‘good’ learning can take, and construct policies and management structures to recognise and encourage diverse forms of good learning (outcomes and processes), whilst supporting colleges and staff in minimising less positive forms of learning.

3.3 recognise and support pedagogic practices that enhance and maintain a values-driven and effective learning culture in any learning site (see below). This entails widening the currently accepted range of ‘good’ pedagogical approaches, and recognising that what works for one tutor in one site may not work for another, in a different site.

3.4 recognise and support tutors in developing pedagogic practices that are creative, innovative and appropriate given their dispositions and the learning culture of the sites where they work.

**College Management**
Within the parameters of current national policy, management, inspection and funding, and of our own dispositions and resources, we should:

3.5 recognise and help staff to recognise the importance of evaluating the value and purposes of learning, as well as its effectiveness. This entails accepting that in any learning site there will be multiple learning processes and outcomes, rather than a single one (such as achieving qualification success).

3.6 support tutors and managers in understanding the learning cultures of the sites where they teach, and in identifying ways in which they could creatively further enhance the positive aspects of those cultures.

3.7 develop and support a reflectively creative and critical approach to pedagogy, in opposition to views that teaching consists of a battery of universal standard techniques.

3.8 develop and support expansive working environments, where tutors can improve their pedagogy through mutual learning, exchanging experiences and meeting constructive challenges.

3.9 develop reward structures for tutors who are innovative, critical and reflective practitioners.

**Tutors**
Within the constraints of existing national and college specific approaches to management, inspection and funding, and of our own dispositions and resources, we should:

3.10 identify and evaluate the range of learning processes and outcomes in any site. This entails recognising a range of positive outcomes, and that some learning can be harmful.
3.11 develop a creative and reflectively critical approach to our own pedagogy, which takes a broad view of what we do and what we should strive to achieve. This may usefully entail seeing pedagogy as concerned with maintaining and enhancing positive learning cultures.

3.12 work with colleagues to establish expansive learning environments for our mutual benefit. Where practicable, this would usefully entail working together to continually improve our practices, and to share judgement making.

3.13 Where practicable, work to engage students in the processes of learning in a site. This may include encouraging them to take creative pedagogic actions for the benefit of themselves and the group.

**Students**

Students often engage in informal pedagogic activities, which can help themselves and others. Where it is possible to engage them in explicit acceptance of this role, there are principles which could guide student actions:

3.14 look for ways to be creative and innovative in supporting our own learning processes, and those of fellow students in the group.

3.15 critically reflect on the learning of ourselves and of our fellow students, and of the parts we play in enhancing or inhibiting such learning.

4. Enhancing positive aspects of a learning culture

This is the most significant finding of the TLC research. It entails seeing the learning culture of a site as complex, relational, and greater than the sum of the parts.

Aim: to enhance the appropriateness and effectiveness of learning cultures in FE, and to maximise positive and opposed to negative learning processes and outcomes.

All the Principles of Procedure already listed contribute to this aim. What follows are important additional principles.

**Principles of Procedure**

**Government and national bodies**

Within the constraints of the social, economic and political context, we should:

4.1 recognise that the impact of policy, management, funding and inspection approaches can have negative as well as positive effects on learning, and critically evaluate current and future approaches from this perspective.

4.2 develop policies and management, funding and inspection approaches that enhance the learning culture of the FE sector as a whole, and encourage further enhancement at college and teaching group levels.

4.3 recognise the impact of wider social and economic structures and processes on learning in FE, and develop policies to minimise the harmful effects of social inequalities and status hierarchies.

4.4 encourage local responsibility and decision making about learning, and provide the space, stable funding and support for that to take place, and for the quality of local management to be improved.

4.5 address and minimise dysfunctional tensions and contradictions between the factors that impact upon learning in FE.

4.6 recognise and support a range of acceptable learning processes and outcomes, reflecting the diversity of local experiences and of student needs.
College Management
Within the parameters of current national policy, management, inspection and funding, and of our own dispositions and resources, we should:

4.7 recognise that management approaches can have negative as well as positive effects upon learning, and critically evaluate current and future approaches from that perspective.

4.8 develop policies and management approaches that enhance the learning culture of the college as a whole, and encourage further enhancement by teaching groups and individual tutors.

4.9 encourage and facilitate local responsibility and decision making about learning, involving creativity, imagination, innovation and professional judgment. Provide the space, stable funding and support for that to take place, within teams and by individual tutors.

4.10 address and minimise dysfunctional tensions and contradictions between the factors that impact upon learning in the college.

4.11 recognise and support a range of acceptable learning processes and outcomes, reflecting the diversity of specific course or group experiences and of student needs.

Tutors
Within the constraints of existing national and college specific approaches to management, inspection and funding, and of our own dispositions and resources, we should:

4.12 identify the key factors affecting learning in each learning site, looking for dysfunctional tensions, constructive synergies, and areas where we have the power to make constructive changes.

4.13 work to improve the effectiveness of learning by maximising positive synergies, and proactively and creatively influencing and mediating the learning culture.

4.14 recognise a range of positive and negative learning processes and outcomes in any learning culture, and work to maximise the former. There are likely to be implications for recruitment and student support, as well as pedagogy.

4.15 work collaboratively with colleagues, to enhance the learning cultures in the range sites where we all teach, and to influence the learning culture of the college.

Students
Individually and collectively, students have a major impact on the learning culture of any site. Where it is possible to engage them actively in the process of culture enhancement, this principle, supported by 3.14 and 3.15 can guide that engagement:

4.16 work collaboratively with fellow students and tutors to enhance the culture for learning in the sites where we study, for ourselves and for other students.

Reference
Learning in community based further education

Project grant holders: Jim Gallacher, Beth Crossan and Terry Mayes

Aims:
The overall aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the learning cultures within further education (FE) community and outreach provision, and through this to facilitate transformations in the learning cultures in these settings, leading to an enhanced engagement with learning.

Significance:
The focus on community based FE reflects the importance of this aspect of provision in encouraging people who have traditionally been least inclined to participate in formal education. The project will enable us to examine the distinctive learning culture which exists in this aspect of FE provision, and to explore ways in which it can be enhanced.

Framework for inquiry:
A distinctive feature of the project is to attempt to bridge across a number of theoretical frameworks in building an understanding of a learning culture. It will draw on social psychological approaches to learning, symbolic interactionist theory, situated learning and learning communities, and the work of Bourdieu.

Closed collaboration with colleagues responsible for one of the existing TLRP Phase 2 projects, Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (The TLC project) has been invaluable in developing this project. This new project will enable us to build on the TLC project, and extend ideas emerging from it into new areas of work.

Two key theoretical perspectives underpin the work. Firstly, the concept of learning relationships, reflecting a belief that it is in the learners’ relationships with others – peers, tutors, but also with people outside the formal learning community - that identity as a learner is forged. The second is learning careers, focusing on the ways that individual dispositions and wider social structures interact and impact on engagement with learning.

The overall aim of this research is to identify how the learning cultures of community based FE can be transformed and enhanced, and the forms of intervention that will be most appropriate in these settings.

The research seeks to identify how the learning cultures of community based FE can be transformed and enhanced, and the forms of intervention that will be most appropriate in these settings.

The research uses a mixed method approach including interviews, focus groups and observations. The initial phases of the research include drawing on the findings from TLRP’s existing TLC project, and working with learners and tutors in the four community based FE settings to construct a common approach to the action research components of the study. Next, with ongoing analysis of the data and regular dialogue with staff and learners, we will highlight ways that these learning cultures may be amenable to a range of interventions or changes. The research team will then work with colleagues in the FE colleges to introduce change and evaluate the impact of these changes.

Research team:
The core team is based in the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning at Glasgow Caledonian University.

The team includes: Jim Gallacher, Terry Mayes, Beth Crossan and Bryony Duncan.

The project will also involve the active participation of College staff, whose contribution as action researchers will be crucial in the project gaining the necessary depth of insight into community based learning cultures.

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The aim of the research is to better understand and help change the learning cultures of community-based FE and in doing so to improve the learning experiences of learners and staff within these settings. Based on interviews with both staff and learners in community learning centres, the project is designed to identify changes which will result in more positive engagement with learning, to implement changes in practice and to evaluate the impact of these changes.

Motivation

So what were your reasons for wanting to be involved in this research?

David: ‘Primarily, I think research matters; it has intrinsic worth. Professionally, it can enhance critical reflection. However, to save me from sounding too precious, I should state that I do research mainly because I enjoy it.’

Lorna: ‘I approached this project with a lot of enthusiasm and a little apprehension. I’ve taught Psychology and Research Methods for eight years in a large community college. I’ve also undertaken data analysis on several research projects for Glasgow Psychological Services. There was a definite gap in my experience in terms of qualitative research methods and I was keen to have the opportunity to explore them, particularly within the comfort zone of education!’

One of the main goals of the project has been to establish a collaborative partnership between FE colleges and the university-based research team. So how far has there been genuine integration within the research team?

David: ‘This has not been a sop. I’m sure I speak for Lorna as well as myself in saying that we have been fully integrated into the research team, being actively involved in all aspects of the project. This has involved taking appropriate research training courses, attending conferences, attending TLRP team-building events and regular project team meetings.

‘We’ve been actively involved in the process of interviewing students and college staff on an individual and group basis and in the fairly arduous process of analysing the data generated from interviews.’

Lorna: ‘The first phase of in-depth interviews was challenging but enjoyable. A Social Research Association (SRA) training day helped prepare the less experienced members of our team for in-depth interview techniques. For the most part, our interviewees provided a rich source of information and here came the most challenging part – the analysis.

‘Adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA), the team spent the first two-hour session analysing just five lines of the transcript. My eyes were widely opened to the completely different nature of qualitative analysis. In summarising the transcripts I constantly had to fight the urge to reduce everything down...’
to summarise in a few short sentences. This was a pretty steep learning curve, but you get a great view from the top of it!

Outcomes

What is the research telling us about the nature of community-based further education? And in what ways might it be able to enhance the learning and teaching experiences for both learners and staff who work in such settings?

David: ‘The most interesting feature of the project, as with all research, is in witnessing the unfolding of the findings. We are still some way from completion but already the fundamental importance of learning relationships is emerging.

‘It’s fair to say that the research focus has narrowed on this area as the work has progressed. This contains some potentially interesting implications for FE practice and policy - the future role of educational technology and the importance of continuous professional development, for example.’

Lorna: ‘There’s a difference in the type of learner who chooses to attend the Community Learning Centre rather than the main campus. In my college, the learning centre is on the main bus route to the campus and buses run every 10 minutes. Learners choose to attend the centre because of its ethos and provision and perhaps a negative stereotype of the main campus. This project is helping the college to focus on the learning experience of learning centre learners in their own right as opposed to looking at them in direct comparison to main campus learners.

‘By studying community learners within the context of community based settings we can better understand their experience and harness this information in ensuring the best provision for learners.’

Research and FE

How does research fit with your role as college lecturers?

David: ‘Currently research plays a minor role in FE but this is beginning to change. And not enough of the research conducted in FE is undertaken by practitioners (Smith, 2004). Clearly there is a rationale to be explored behind this. And it may indeed be a complex issue. However, my attendance at last year’s TLRP conference in Cardiff helped throw one of the issues into relief. There was an august delegate list, which brought to mind an early scene from Woody Allen’s film Annie Hall:

“Robin: There’s Henry Drucker. He has a chair in history at Princeton. Oh, and the short man is Hershel Kaminsky. He has a chair in philosophy at Cornell.

“Alvy Singer: Yeah? Two more chairs they got a dining room set.”

‘In my experience, Alvy’s acerbic comment highlights a challenge facing educational research, which is often perceived as (possibly sometimes is) distant and irrelevant, even mystical. This is acknowledged in a recent report by SFEU (Elliot, 2005).

‘The conference did have its dry moments. However, overall I found it an extremely interesting and useful three days, both personally and in the context of our project. I think it was important that there was a presence, however small, among the full-time academics of practitioner researchers. While a great deal of extremely important work was discussed, there were one or two sessions which would frankly have benefited from a greater presence of practitioners. Conversely, I believe many practitioners would give a more sympathetic ear to research if it were demystified.’
Research into community learning led by the Centre for Lifelong Learning at Glasgow Caledonian University has provided an ideal opportunity for college staff to engage with partnership working at first hand. Seconded on a part-time basis to work on the project, Lorna Smith and David Watson reflect on their experiences over the three-year project, due for completion this autumn.

Firstly, there’s ‘partnership’ within our research team – two college-based Research Fellows, two university-based Research Fellows and two project directors. In colleges we’re often ‘researched upon’ by others rather than researching our own sector; although our team is led by Glasgow Caledonian University it’s an example of how to build research capacity for college staff.

Overall we feel that this partnership between a university and two colleges has been working effectively – each member of the team brings different knowledge and experience and this allows a unique voice to emerge. Having college staff intimately involved with the minutiae of the project allows depth to develop that, in other circumstances, would not be so prominent. We hope that the experience gained will also be valuable for colleges in the future.

Another form of partnership is that between learning centres and main college campuses. Staff liaise closely to ensure the smooth running of courses, arrange tutors and identify future demand for courses. One of our aims has been to explore the ways in which these relationships work and to enhance the profile of the work undertaken in community learning centres.

What’s emerging is that the cultures in community-based learning centres are conducive to the development of partnerships between different types of staff and between staff and learners. Both groups have indicated in interviews strong feelings of a caring and supportive atmosphere, where relationships of trust are high and inequalities of power and status are often consciously underplayed.

Non-teaching staff play a critical role in supporting and nurturing relationships of trust and competence within the centres and for providing important links with main college campuses. They appear to balance the co-ordinating and caring relationships in the centre with their ultimate accountability to main college management for student enrolment numbers and provision of courses.

The richness of our research derives from an appreciation of the differences that characterise each set of partnerships. There are checks and balances, motivators and rewards. With the notion of partnership comes the idea of trust and co-operation to meet joint aims but also the idea of accountability, responsibility, diversity and challenge. It is the diversity of the partnerships that enriches the research process and proves most challenging in terms of the different agendas promoted and the compromises that have to be reached.

By David Watson and Lorna Smith.
Understanding and Enhancing Learning Cultures in Community-Based Further Education (UELC) is a three-year research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Scottish Executive. A collaboration between the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRLL) at Glasgow Caledonian University, Anniesland College in Glasgow and James Watt College in Greenock, the project team includes two part-time ‘college-based Research Fellows’ – Anniesland’s David Watson and Lorna Smith from James Watt.

Family

Many staff and learners also report the importance of family in giving support – both practical and emotional – by promoting strong feelings of motivation and commitment. Interestingly, non-supportive family members can prove equally motivating for individuals!

The Viewpoint: Community Partners

Cultures in community-based learning centres are conducive to the development of partnerships between different types of staff and between staff and learners.

Focal Point

A second idea of partnership is the ways we’ve been working with the two community learning centres involved in the research. They have played an important role in giving access to students and in providing a focal point for the interviewing strategy. By interviewing both teaching and non-teaching staff we’ve gained a greater understanding of the complexity of the work undertaken by staff in community learning centres.
Providing Further Education in the Community

Around 30% of learndirect scotland branded learning centres are within the further education college sector. This article focuses on the provision of community-based learning, identifying reasons for its success, potential issues around progress and ways to help learners overcome them.

The provision of community based learning opportunities by further education (FE) colleges is increasingly recognised as being of importance in providing opportunities for adult learners to return to education. Many of these adult returners have had earlier educational experiences which have undermined their confidence as learners, and their motivation to learn. Community learning centres linked to the FE colleges can provide valuable ways back into learning for many of these learners. Working with the learners in these centres can pose particular challenges for the staff involved which are, in important ways, different from those experienced by campus based staff. However the community based centres are often peripheral to the work of the college in both a geographical and structural sense. It is important that the issues faced by staff in these centres are recognised, and appropriate support is provided for them.

Many learners who return to study in community based learning centres can be seen as being ‘uncertain’ or ‘fragile’ learners. This is often associated with earlier rather negative learning experiences. These learners can require considerable levels of support if they are to overcome this uncertainty.

For many of the ‘uncertain’ learners who attend these community learning centres the motivation to engage in learning, and develop ‘learning careers’, is something which only emerges gradually. Their initial reasons for attending classes in community learning centres may reflect factors other than a strong motivation to return to study.

Some issues for college managers to consider:

- the role of the tutor in providing support and encouragement for ‘uncertain’ or ‘fragile’ learners emerges as a key aspect of their role within community learning centres. While the subject specific aspect of their role is important, this emerges as being less central, and the wider supportive role is emphasised.
- many learners are initially wary of assessments. While assessments continue to be important, and learners often say that they value the formal recognition provided by certificates, it appears that it is often useful to down-play the place of assessment at least in the first instance.
- tutors often have to work with a wide range of learners, who may bring with them a range of health and emotional problems, and it is important that tutors are prepared for the range of problems they may encounter.

Many of these adult returners have had earlier educational experiences which have undermined their confidence as learners, and their motivation to learn.
LEARNING PRINCIPLES

To guard against this, colleges should ensure that:

• learners have access to appropriate information about the opportunities for progression to further study, work or training which may take them beyond the community learning centres.
• learners have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in making informed choices.
• initiatives are in place to assist with transition. These may include visits to the main college campus to introduce them to a new learning environment which may initially appear threatening. Mentoring schemes involving learners who have already made the transition can also prove useful.
• in cases where the college campus is located at some distance, appropriate arrangements are in place to assist with travel.

There is now clear evidence of the success of community learning centres in providing routes back into study for many adult learners who would otherwise be unlikely to re-engage with study (Gallacher et al, 2000). However it is also clear that if these learners are to be successful in their studies, and are to progress to further study, training or work, their needs must be recognised. There is evidence that the staff within community learning centres are very supportive of the learners with whom they work, and that this is recognised by these learners. However there is also evidence that the staff who work in these centres have particular needs for support, and that these needs should also be recognised and met (Duncan et al, 2004).

• traditional methods of advertising courses and attracting learners are of little value with many potential learners. It appears that relatively few use college prospectuses or telephone helplines. Informal local networks are important means of communication.
• providing attractive taster courses in a range of subjects can be an important way of bringing potential learners into the centres.
• facilities which are not directly associated with learning, such as childcare for young mothers, can be significant in encouraging potential learners to take part in activities in the community learning centres.

The ambience of community learning centres can be of crucial importance in supporting adult learners. Many learners attend such centres not just because they are geographically convenient, but also because they provide a supportive cultural context. The wider pattern of social relationships is often of considerable importance in shaping the learning experiences of learners in community learning centres.

Some more issues for college managers to consider:

• the role of the support staff – centre managers, administrators, janitors etc. – is often crucial in providing a supportive environment for learners in community learning centres. These are the people who are there permanently in the context of a changing population of part-time tutors, who come and go for their classes, and learners who come and go in the same way. They have a key role in creating the ethos within the centre, and the context in which people work and study. It is important that the roles of these staff are recognised and properly supported.
• creating supportive environments within community learning centres, which recognise the role of peer support as well as the role of staff, is of considerable importance.
• it can be of significant value to recognise the role of family relationships with children, parents, sibling and partners in motivating adult learners and supporting them in their studies. These relationships can be complex and, for example, the role of partners may not always be supportive.
• informal local networks involving friends and neighbours can be of importance, both in encouraging initial engagement with study, and in supporting continued involvement and progression.

Issues can arise associated with progression from community learning centres and transition to other types of study. While the community learning centres are often very successful in recruiting learners from non-traditional backgrounds, and in supporting many of them in their studies, there may be a danger that the community learning centres become ‘comfort zones’ for some learners for whom it would be good to progress to other study or work.

Informal local networks involving friends and neighbours can be of importance, both in encouraging initial engagement with study, and in supporting continued involvement and progression.
A three-year project involving researchers at the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRLL) in Glasgow Caledonian University and two Scottish colleges is looking at how learning cultures can be transformed to increase engagement in community-based further education. The researchers have had to reflect carefully on how the project can be made genuinely collaborative, says coordinator JIM GALLACHER

Although community-based adult learning can be enormously effective in drawing into learning those who feel excluded from the education system, little research has been done into how this potential can be turned to the advantage of disengaged learners. Researchers in Scotland hope to go some way to redressing this by providing, for the first time, a systematic understanding of the learning cultures – the individual, social, economic and historical factors that shape learning experiences – associated with community-based further education. Through this, says coordinator Professor Jim Gallacher, the project aims to identify changes in practice which will lead directly to enhanced engagement with learning. Understanding and Enhancing Learning Cultures in Community-based Further Education – a TLRP-funded partnership of CRLL in Glasgow Caledonian University, Anniesland College and James Watt College (North Ayrshire Campus) – will look to work closely with the wider FE community in a process of investigation, dissemination and reflection, which, the team hopes, will provide models for the transformation of learning cultures in this frequently overlooked form of provision.

The research builds on the work of the Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education project – based on a partnership between four universities and four FE colleges in England, led by Professor Phil Hodkinson at Leeds University – by focusing on an aspect of provision which is not central to that project. Community-based further education, Professor Gallacher says, has become an increasingly important part of the work of many FE colleges – not surprisingly as it provides a vital link between the FE community and those currently excluded from it. ‘It is particularly significant for people who don’t have a strong history of involvement in FE,’ says Glasgow Caledonian-based Gallacher. ‘Community-based education can be very important as a way of encouraging people to return to education and helping them to develop a confidence in their ability as learners – something that may lead to a renewed engagement with the whole learning process. One of the things we learned from the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning’s previous work on the ways in which colleges can reengage learners who have withdrawn from the system was that people’s motivation to learn often emerges gradually over time. It’s only really as people become involved in forms of learning that the motivation to continue to engage in learning emerges.

‘That’s a central theme of the work we are doing. We are trying to explore what are the characteristics of a learning culture that encourage people to engage with learning. We’re looking at community-based learning in two quite different colleges, two quite different geographical, cultural contexts: one a college based in Glasgow, the other a college based in a more small-town situation, which draws people from the town and from the area thebarabout. The Anniesland College community learning centre in Glasgow is in a former unemployed workers’ centre, which has also been home to a food co-op and a credit union, and which is part of the local community in the housing scheme where it is based; the one involving James Watt College was developed as a formal learning centre. It’s actually attached to a school, and has got quite a different atmosphere and structure. We want to explore what people perceive as the things that encourage them to be learners and that really support them in the learning process. And we will look at how different centres might develop different sorts of cultures.’

‘Learning cultures’
The concept of a ‘learning culture’, which lies at the heart of the team’s work, is, Gallacher admits, quite elusive. ‘Basically, what we are trying to explore is what are the various elements that contribute to a culture that people either find supportive of learning or which makes it difficult for people to engage in learning. Obviously, this will have various elements to it, some to do with the formal end, the curriculum and the formal arrangements associated with teaching and assessment. But there are also aspects to do with the way in which the staff interact with students. One of the things that many of the students we’re interviewing comment on is the level of informality of the community-based learning context, the way in which the successful relationships are ones in which informality is a key element. Many of the students contrast that example with their experience of school, which they characterise as being quite negative and something that alienated them.’

Another key concept the researchers will be working with is that of ‘learning relationships’. Learning relationships, Gallacher says, are not merely the relationships which are to be found in the classroom, between student and tutor and among fellow students. ‘Learning relationships might be relationships you have with members of your family, which either encourage you or discourage you, they might be relationships with your friends, they might be relationships that you have with fellow learners which are not a part of the learning process itself, but are part of a wider set of relationships. Relationships with partners are very important and can be either negative or positive. A partner who is hostile can make it very difficult for someone to develop a
learning career. Conversely, there are cases where partners perceived as being hostile or uninterested can act as a spur in developing a learning career – almost as an escape.

‘Then again, quite a lot of the learners are single parents, they don’t have a partner at all, and relationships with their parents and siblings, and with their own children, are often very important things that they talk about as being influential in various complex ways – as are relationships with friends and peers. So the culture that we are talking about is something bringing together all these different elements. What we are trying to explore is how all these different elements are coming together to either create a cultural environment which is supportive, or a cultural environment that makes it more difficult, for people to engage. It is going to be very interesting to explore the different kinds of social relationship people are involved with, which affect their engagement with the whole learning process.’

Community-based FE will be the sole focus of the team’s work. ‘Not many people have spent a lot of time looking systematically at what happens in FE community-based learning,’ says Gallacher, ‘It is quite an under-researched area. Yet it is very important in terms of the social inclusion agenda, the whole process of reengaging learners. It’s not an area which we really know a lot about. This project will help us understand much better what happens in these community-based contexts and how we can improve the learning that takes place within them.’

**Return to learning**

The work will link neatly with the lifelong learning agenda which has developed in Scotland around the Parliament’s recent enquiry, which Gallacher advised. One of the things that emerged in the enquiry was an acknowledgement of the importance of informal and community-based learning as a way of reengaging people and supporting them in their return to learning – a point since recognised in the Executive’s lifelong learning strategy. Gallacher’s team will aim to pick up some of the themes of the report and to show how this area of work can be taken forward. ‘Our aim is to have an impact on policy and practice in the world of further education which will enhance this area of work,’ says Gallacher. ‘The long-term objective is to enhance the nature of community-based learning in the further education sector. We’re interested in the wider educational policy community as well. The area has enormous potential, but it is an area that has not been very central to educational policy or strategy. We hope this will encourage people to see how important this is and to recognise the need to take appropriate measures to support it.’

Partnership, Gallacher says, will be central to the success of the project. His aim is to ensure that college staff are not merely engaged but directly involved in the project. ‘We want to make clear that it is not a matter of us as researchers going into colleges to do research. It is a matter of forming a team made up of staff from the colleges and staff from CRLL who will work together to explore these issues.’ Staff from both colleges were involved in early discussion about the aims and scope of the project and two college-based research fellows have since been recruited to work part-time with the CRLL-based researchers. Both have been engaged in the interviewing of students and the analysis of the early data. Non-teaching and teaching staff at the centres have also been interviewed. Once the data has been analysed and themes have begun to emerge as to which factors lead people to become involved in learning and which militate against it, there will be a further feeding back to the wider group of staff and students within the two colleges. ‘We will then jointly reflect on what opportunities for change this might lead to,’ says Gallacher. ‘Can we as a joint group identify possibilities for change that would enhance the learning environment? The idea will be to ask whether we can introduce that change and then, at a later stage of the research, we would look at the process of introducing change and try to investigate the extent to which that change has any impact.

‘There is a very strong emphasis on the idea of developing this research as a collaborative project. It’s essential to the whole TLRP programme but it’s been absolutely central to the way that we have thought about this project. If there is any chance of having an impact for change in the colleges it will only be because we have been successful in this respect. Dissemination will be critically important.’ It is something on which CRLL has always placed enormous emphasis, not only producing a wide range of written publications, but setting up the long-running Scottish Forum for Lifelong Learning to bring together members of the policy, practice and research communities. The team will also use the Scottish Further Education Unit’s infrastructure to disseminate its findings to the wider college community in Scotland. ‘We want people in colleges that are not part of our project to understand the work we are doing and hopefully that will influence what they do,’ says Gallacher. ‘And we hope this will be taken up not just by people in Scotland, but beyond Scotland, in the rest of the UK – and beyond.’

The willingness of the two colleges to involve themselves in the research reflects, Gallacher thinks, their recognition of the importance of community-based learning within further education. ‘They are hoping, I think, in the short term, that it will help them better understand what they are doing in this field and how that work can be improved. The project is also designed to enhance the research capability that exists within the colleges, so the colleges have got more people who are better equipped and trained to undertake research. In the longer term, this will enhance the capacity of the colleges to undertake work of this kind after this project is finished.’
5th Annual Conference, 22-24 November 2004
Cardiff Marriott Hotel

Understanding Learning Cultures in Community Based Further Education: working together towards enhancement

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NB: This paper was presented at an internal TLRP conference; if you wish to quote from it please contact the authors directly for permission. Contact details for each project and thematic initiative can be found on our website (www.tlrp.org).
Understanding Learning Cultures in Community Based Further Education: working together towards enhancement

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Our project – Understanding and Enhancing Learning Cultures in Community-Based Further Education – aims to achieve an enhancement of the student experience in community based further education (FE) through a deeper shared understanding of learning cultures in this setting. This paper provides an outline of the project, an update on progress so far, and reports on our approach to the analysis of the data and initial outcomes of the first phase of fieldwork. Running through all of these elements will be an exploration of the process of building a co-operative relationship with our two partner FE colleges. We conclude by considering the implications of this first phase for the development of the project.

Outline of the project

This project involves researchers at the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRL), Glasgow Caledonian University, working in partnership with two further education colleges in Scotland. The overall aim of the project is to facilitate transformations in the learning cultures within community based provision attached to these colleges, and through this to enhance engagement with learning in these settings. Through the course of the project, we will seek to develop a better understanding of existing learning cultures, identify with our partners how these can be enhanced, and in doing so improve the learning experiences of learners and tutors within these settings.

An understanding of learning cultures is central to the research. A distinctive feature of our approach is the emphasis which we place on the concept of learning relationships. This builds on the earlier work of Fowler and Mayes (1999), and is derived from the broad assumptions of situated learning. This project draws on two themes associated with situated learning (Barab and Duffy,1999). One is a socio-psychological view of situativity which emphasises the importance of context-dependent learning in informal settings. The second is a social anthropological theme in which the influence of a wider social context is emphasised (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Across these themes, the focus shifts from the learner’s relationship with the direct activities of learning to the learner’s relationship with a wider but identifiable group of people, and to the wider practice. This provides a different perspective on what is ‘situated’. Our approach sets out to bridge the psychological and anthropological views of situated learning by focussing on the concept of learning relationships. The aim is to consider how, in designing learning environments and tasks, we might usefully shift our focus away from the design of activities. We will instead examine more carefully what it is that motivates learners to engage in the educational experience in the first place, what sustains their engagement, and the importance of the prevailing culture in the site of learning.

Exploring learning relationships, therefore, is a crucial element in the research. A learning relationship exists when we learn from or through others, or when a relationship has an impact on a learner’s fundamental disposition to learning. These could include relationships with others in the learning environment (eg tutors/lecturers, other learners); or relationships with people not directly connected to the learning, but who have an influence on how the learner views learning and whether they view themselves as learners. The communities of practice view has emphasised the importance of relationships with wider groups, particularly those associated with discipline-based practice. Here, we consider also the role played by the stable practice group represented by a community setting, by personal relationships with key individuals in the learner’s life circumstances, and particularly the role played by shorter-term and more fragile groups associated with the learner’s current contexts. We also attempt to identify relationships with practice groups that may have no direct connection with the learner’s current setting, but which nevertheless can be regarded as exerting an influence on the learner’s ‘learning identity’.
The project is also an extension of the Phase II TLRP project Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) in Further Education. In developing their approach to learning cultures, the TLC project team has drawn on the work of Bourdieu, and his ideas of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1989). We wish to explore the extent to which these ideas can help us understand more deeply the contexts which help shape learning relationships and interactions within community based FE. *Field* directs our attention to the rules and principles, both explicit and implicit, which govern and shape action within this setting. The sub-field of community based FE must be understood in relation both to the communities within which people live, and to the wider fields of FE and of education. It will ‘connect with, and partly share the principles of the superordinate fields’ (Grenfell and James, 1998, p.20). However, there are clearly possibilities of conflict between the culture of the communities, and the culture of FE. In this respect Bourdieu’s idea of *capital* may be of value. *Capital* is one of the elements which structures activity and helps position people within fields. In the context of education, cultural capital is of particular importance.

The concept of the *authentic learning site* used by the TLC project is also helpful in understanding the importance of learning relationships. Authors from the TLC project recommend that studies of learning must not simply focus on temporally or spatially prescribed learning sites. Rather, they emphasise the need to recognise authentic learning sites, which ‘include, potentially, much of what is recognised in formally prescribed learning opportunities but they also include much that is not prescribed such as home, peer group, and personal relations, accidents, career and other aspirations, and even sleep’ (James and Bloomer, 2001, p.7). They describe how such learning sites are situated within a range of wider networks, and as such must be explored and understood in terms of such situativity.

The third main theoretical perspective used in this project has been developed around the idea of *learning careers*. The idea of learning careers draws on symbolic interactionist theory, and the processes through which social identity is shaped and reshaped through interaction with others (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Gallacher *et al* 2002). The concept of ‘career’ refers here to the processes through which people’s self perception changes and their involvement in certain areas of activity develops as a consequence of this interaction. Consideration of learning careers will involve an exploration of the ways that interaction with others (*learning relationships*) shapes and influences an individual’s commitment to the learning process and the impact that this may have on their identity as a learner (*disposition to learning*). The idea of a learning career also recognises that there may be other more structural factors, such as gender, or low income, which have an impact on whether or not someone is able to continue learning. This use of the idea of learning careers will help us analyse the processes of engagement with the learning cultures which exist within community based settings.

These three perspectives will help us understand how learning cultures are shaped and changed, and the implications of this for learners’ dispositions towards, and engagement with, learning.

**Stages of research**

The first stage of the project was key in establishing the basis of our collaboration with our two partner FE colleges. During this stage we had discussions with our partners both separately and together, negotiating a number of elements of the research, not least the concept of ‘sites of research’, and the associated practical implications. We were very conscious that building good working relationships at this stage would be crucial to the project’s overall success. We sought to involve our partners as fully as possible in the development of the project, and to provide them with regular updates on progress.

Two college-based research fellows (one from each college) were appointed at that first stage, and have become fully integrated members of the research team. Each of these research fellows is involved with activities that involve both partner colleges. This has meant that they are able to provide valuable information and insights about their own college provision, but also can explore aspects of the provision in their colleague’s college from an informed yet removed stance.

Through detailed discussions it was agreed that the fieldwork would be undertaken in one community-based learning centre (CLC) attached to each college. The two partner colleges are somewhat different from each other, and the two CLCs that are the focus of our fieldwork are very different from each other. One is a fairly new development in the wing of a secondary school. It is a community facility.
that has been developed by the college, and is visibly branded as such. It is located a few miles from one of the main college campuses, and serves a fairly wide geographical area. The other has evolved from being an unemployed workers centre into a learning centre for which the college has a management responsibility. It is also located a few miles from the main college campus, but serves a much smaller local community. However, local knowledge about the existence of this learning centre, and its association with the main college would appear to be relatively limited.

Two courses were identified in each of the CLCs, and interviews were sought with learners and staff associated with all four courses. The courses were chosen on the basis that they should represent a diversity of provision, in terms of subject matter, mode of attendance, levels of learner and teaching and learning styles. Due to the difficult nature of planning associated with community based further education, the choice of courses that were available was somewhat limited. However, we are pleased with the diversity of the courses that were eventually included.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Mode of attendance</th>
<th>Course duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An introductory level computing course, with elements of literacy and numeracy</td>
<td>5 half days / week</td>
<td>1 academic year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL)</td>
<td>2 days / week</td>
<td>1 academic year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An interior design course</td>
<td>5 half days / week</td>
<td>2 academic years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An introduction to counselling</td>
<td>1 day / week</td>
<td>1 academic term</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first phase of fieldwork is now complete. The overall aim of this phase is to consider the extent to which the key elements of a learning culture are captured by our four components (learning relationships, dispositions to learning, perceptions of the learning environment, and approaches to learning and teaching), and to examine their interaction. For each learner the relative importance of these components may differ, and they may also interact in different ways. We have conducted three group discussions with learners, and 23 one-to-one interviews with learners and staff. These have explored the factors that contribute to their specific experience of learning, the influences on learning in their lives and their involvement in community-based FE. The findings from the first phase of fieldwork will be used to explore with tutors, senior college staff, and students, ways in which aspects of the learning culture may be amenable to change. The aim of any change is to enhance the learning experiences. The process for deciding on the type of change to be introduced and how this will be done will be a collaborative one, involving staff, learners and members of the research team. Changes which have been agreed, and which are feasible, will be implemented, and the impact on the learning culture evaluated.

**Data analysis**

The methodological approach of the project is based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This is an approach that is focussed on how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds, and the meanings that particular experiences, events and states hold for individuals (Smith and Osborn, 2003). This approach to the analysis of our data is particularly relevant since a significant influence for this methodological approach is symbolic interactionism, a theoretical perspective which also underpins the idea of learning careers. In symbolic interactionism, ‘the meanings which individuals ascribe to events are of central concern, but those meanings are only obtained through a process of social engagement and a process of interpretation’ (IPA website www.pyc.bbk.ac.uk/ipa/whatisipa.htm). It requires in-depth qualitative analysis of the data from each interview as a case study, which results in detailed readings and discussions of each transcript. It is therefore particularly suited to a context in which the emphasis has been on obtaining rich and detailed information from a relatively small number of respondents. This has been a very challenging task not least because of the amount of data to be analysed, but importantly because of the multi-disciplinary nature of the research team. Although this has contributed to the length of time required to adequately analyse each transcript, it has also meant that our interpretations have been enriched by the differing perspectives within the team.

IPA requires an initial identification of themes. We are currently examining themes in the following areas:
• **Work and personal history**  
This includes demographic data like age, children, marital status, and any life experiences that might throw some light on the past, current or future learning role.

• **Learning history**  
This includes all prior, current and intended/future learning.

• **Perceptions of the learning environment**  
This is what the participants think of the physical and social aspects of the learning environment. It includes descriptions and attitudes.

• **Approaches to teaching and learning**  
This is what the participants think of the way that teaching is undertaken and how learning takes place.

• **Learning relationships**  
These are the relationships that a learner describes, which have an impact on their learning. This includes all aspects of relationships with other people that have any connection (even if it’s quite indirect) with the experiences or knowledge of, or motivation for, the learning role.

• **Dispositions to learning**  
This is how the learner feels about learning and how important it is to them in the context of their life. This includes all other personal factors or characteristics that might be deemed of some relevance to the learning experience.

Consideration of these emerging themes will inform our understanding of the learning cultures in each setting, and will feed into future discussions with partners about the next stages of the research.

**Emerging Themes**

In the first place it seems clear that learning relationships, defined in the inclusive way outlined above, are central to the development of learning cultures in community based FE, and to the development of learning careers. This can be seen as a complex process in which the concept of ‘habitus’ helps direct us towards the relationship between the structural position of learners and potential learners and their dispositions towards learning. The ‘field’ of community based FE also emerges as a complex one, which is shaped by the super-ordinate field of FE, but also by the culture which learners bring into the CLC, and by the learning relationships which are established between staff and students, and among the student groups. The significant differences between the two centres, noted above, have consequences for both learning relationships and learning cultures. Below, we outline some of the important relationships which have emerged as shaping the learning cultures within the CLCs. The implications of these for the development of learning careers are then briefly considered. (Where quotes have been used in the following sections, the reference in brackets refers to the code assigned to the participant in the research, with L referring to interviews with learners, and S referring to interviews with staff.)

**Learning relationships and learning cultures**

~ **Relationships in earlier learning**

Unsurprisingly, the first set of learning relationships which can be observed are ones which pre-date involvement in the CLCs and refer to students’ earlier learning histories. Respondents have a range of previous educational experience. Many have left school with practically no recognised qualifications, although a small number have qualifications but have had to change career through illness or disability, for example. Similarly, respondents have reported a wide range of contact with learning opportunities. Many have had no involvement with formal learning opportunities for a long time, while others have undertaken a variety of courses before contact with the CLC. Many respondents indicated that their previous learning experiences have been negative. In some cases, this had actively discouraged further study, and had created a significant barrier for the process of returning to formal learning.
I didn’t particularly enjoy school, I think that might actually be one of the reasons why I’m kind of put off college, the thought of, because I didn’t even think school was a great place, so I think maybe thinking about going to college or classing it as the same sort of idea which is probably one of the reasons that puts me off. (L1)

When probed, many of these earlier negative learning experiences are described in terms of negative relationships, and are closely associated with negative dispositions towards learning. One issue that we will explore in greater depth concerns the attribution of both positive and negative experiences (to attributes of self, relationships with others, structural features of the environment, etc.) and the way in which these relate to dispositions. The links between relationships, experiences, dispositions and the emergence of a learning culture are crucial in trying to unravel in the context of learning cultures, in which lack of confidence and insecurity describe the experience of many community based learners.

~ Family relationships

The second set of learning relationships are ones associated with families and these emerge as very important for many learners. Most respondents are female, not in employment, many have children, some are lone parents, and there is a large range of ages. Many cite their relationships with their children as providing an impetus for undertaking their current course. This includes mothers with young children for whom creche facilities enable them to get out of the house with their child. This is seen as being important for both the child, and in helping to get the mother ‘out of a rut’. In other cases mothers refer to the need for a better job with more money for children’s needs. For many respondents, the requirements of caring for children, often as a single parent, has a big structural effect on their approach to learning, and the types of opportunities that they can engage with (eg day time classes that fit with school hours, evening study at home is difficult etc.). Relationships with siblings, particularly sisters are also mentioned by a number of respondents as encouraging return to study, and providing support for work as a learner.

... and my sister, she knows how to do like the database and the spreadsheet, but she’s self-taught, she’s had to teach herself in the jobs that she’s done and she’s quite chuffed that I’m doing this as well... (L4)

Mothers are influential in a range of ways, from active involvement as co-learners to providers of childcare.

... if it wasn’t for her [mother] half the time I wouldn’t be able to make it, because if the kids haven’t been well or I’ve had somewhere to go. But she’s loving it, thinking that I might manage to do something out of it (L3)

Relationships with spouses or partners are also often mentioned by respondents, although the influences can be a complex mixture of the positive and negative. While some respondents report partners who are supportive, a number of women comment on jealousy regarding their involvement in the CLC and a generally unsupportive attitude on the part of partners. In these cases, this can act as a barrier to continued study or as a motivating factor with their involvement in learning as a means of moving towards independence from their partner.

He’ll have to get on with it himself, that’s my plan (L3)

Overall then, family relationships are clearly crucial in understanding learning cultures in CLCs, and this will have considerable importance when considering how learning can be enhanced.

~ Relationships within the community

The place of the CLC in the local community and the relationship between learners within these communities emerged as the third important set of learning relationships. There were important differences between the two CLCs in this respect, with one being more clearly embedded in a relatively small local community, while the other served a wider area. However, even in the more local centre it was notable that a number of respondents reported that they had been unaware that this was a learning centre, and it was only when told by friends or relatives that they became aware of the opportunities
available. These informal relationships are important as the means through which many students become engaged with learning, and in supporting them in their continued involvement with the centre.

_I actually met a friend on a bus and I asked her what she was doing with herself and she told me that she was doing the ESF course in here and I had asked her details about it and she said ‘Why don’t you phone up about it?’ and then I phoned up_ (L1)

A number of respondents have made it clear that they would not be prepared or able to attend a course in a more remote and formal setting, and a number of tutors have also recognised the importance of these CLCs as the initial step for adult learners.

... miles better because of its location, because of its layout (S15)

These issues of location and size are important, but it seems that these are not just issues of physical location, but also of cultural location and proximity, which raises again the interaction of different ‘fields’ in the creation of the learning cultures within the CLCs. The issue of how the role of the CLCs within their communities can be enhanced is then a further issue for consideration.

~ Staff-student relationships

The fourth set of learning relationships which are emphasised by respondents are those between staff and students. In discussing the role of staff it should be noted first of all that the administrative and support staff emerge as important figures for many students. It is often through these staff that students first hear about opportunities for study. This is illustrated by this student’s account of her first contact with the centre. She recounts that she heard about the course through a leaflet which her son brought home from school.

So I phoned the number up ... and I think I spoke to [administrator] and she said come along for a chat and I did and I was quite impressed ... (L8)

These staff are also often important in indicating and advising on the opportunities for further study. It is important that the role of these staff is fully recognised, and the implications for their support are considered.

Another strong theme that is emerging with respect to staff is related to the approach taken by tutors. Most respondents have commented that tutors have a relaxed and flexible approach to their teaching, and engage with learners as equals. Characteristics such as patience, sense of humour, helpfulness and discretion are valued very highly by most respondents in helping overcome insecurities and building confidence in their role as learners.

Well I would say [tutor] was probably one of the nicest and most patient person I’ve ever met actually, any problems I think you would find it quite easy to go and talk to her ... (L3)

Tutors are frequently compared in a favourable light to experiences of teachers at school, and tutors also recognise this different role.

... students don’t see you so much as threat, an authoritarian role ... (S15)

Tutors also comment on the differences in the approach which is required of them in this context. They emphasise the importance of a supportive role which builds the confidence of the students, rather than a more traditional teaching role, and the challenges which this creates for them.

[The] differences are vast ... it’s a juggling act and more balls get added in ... I can end up with five subjects going on in the same room ... (S12)

This raises interesting issues regarding how tutors are recruited or selected for work within CLCs, the extent to which they are prepared for this role, and the support provided by the colleges including opportunities for peer support. In this respect tutors comment that this type of work is not covered within the in-service teaching qualification for FE lecturers, and the possible value of induction and ongoing support.
~ Peer-learning relationships

The fifth set of learning relationships which emerge as being of importance are those among the students themselves. A number of students report that they only became involved with the course because of someone that they knew who encouraged them to come along. Students also comment on the importance of a relaxed and friendly environment within the classroom which makes an important contribution to the enjoyment of participating in the learning activity.

*I mean you don’t just sit there and work, you have a good laugh as well, so if you’re like having a talk and a laugh and you’re doing the work it makes that a wee bit easier rather than concentrating. I mean personally, for me, if I concentrate too hard then my brain goes like that [clicks fingers] and I won’t be able to remember anything, whereas if I was turned round, talking and having a laugh and I do a bit of work then it’s a lot easier to do I think, personally* (L4)

Friendly classmates who will help each other in class, and are generally supportive are reported as being of great importance.

*... we’re not all learning individually, although we’re all learning. So we’re all getting involved together, and we all have a discussion. It’s not just one person that’s left with it, we’re all getting involved in it ...* (L7)

In some cases, these relationships also extend outside the classroom to coffee breaks and social evenings, and some tutors report that they join with students in these social evenings.

However, while respondents indicated the extent to which they valued these important relationships, a number emerged as being already highly committed and self-directing learners.

The supportive relationships between students are therefore clearly an important part of the ‘field’ of community based FE, and this again raises questions about how they might be enhanced.

Learning relationships and learning careers

Learning relationships have been presented above as sets of relationships occurring in different locations and with different people. They can however also be grouped together in a different way which may help us understand their contribution to the development of learning careers. A possible way of ordering the relationships could be as follows.

- relationships that encourage learners to re-enter a formal learning situation, and assist them in gaining access into learning;
- relationships that either facilitate or present barriers/challenges to participation in a learning activity;
- relationships that contribute to a learner’s engagement with the learning process;
- relationships that encourage and facilitate plans for future learning activities.

This approach will be developed in the future analysis of these data.

Conclusions

We offer the following as initial conclusions from our project to date. However, the process of our interpretation of the interview transcripts is very much work in progress.

1. We have sought to achieve a real sense of ownership of the design, conduct and interpretation of the research, in our partner colleges. Such a level of involvement is essential for us to achieve the full goals of the project, where the effects of change are to be evaluated in the practices themselves. Without a joint commitment to a practical enhancement of the learning experience we cannot expect to be able to achieve the objectives of the research. A sensitive
balance between occasionally competing interests has been, and will have to be, achieved through continuous dialogue between the partners. These issues (which are about learning relationships within the project itself) may well be at least as important as the more formal methodological design and analysis issues.

2. Attempting an analysis of the learners’ perspectives on the community-based learning culture, which is the primary goal of the project, has already deepened our understanding of what the research questions themselves might mean. Our initial distinctions between the concepts of learning relationships, dispositions to learning, learning careers and learning cultures, and the complex interactions which we see emerging, already seem to be sharpened by the cross-disciplinary discourse that has developed in the project itself.

References


IPA website, ‘What is IPA?’, www.psyc.bbk.ac.uk/ipa/whatisipa.htm [accessed 6/10/04].


Working together to improve community based learning in further education

Researchers at the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning at Glasgow Caledonian University are engaged in a three-year project which is designed to better understand and then enhance the experience of learners in community based learning centres attached to further education colleges. This project is part of the UK wide Teaching and Learning Research Programme and is being undertaken in partnership with two further education colleges in Scotland – James Watt College and Anniesland College. Collaborative working between researchers and practitioners is a key aspect of this programme.

Professor Jim Gallacher, Co-director of the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRLL), who is leading this project, has commented that community based provision is increasingly important to the work of many FE colleges. It has also been recognised by both the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive as an important means of attracting adult learners back to education. While this type of work has become increasingly important for the FE sector, the range of provision varies considerably between colleges. Anniesland College’s community based centre is a former unemployed workers’ centre, home to a food co-op and a local credit union – a crucial part of the local community. The centre at James Watt’s North Ayrshire Campus was built as a formal learning centre and is attached to a local school. Despite the growing importance of community based learning Jim Gallacher comments that ‘not many people have spent a lot of time looking systematically at what happens in community learning centres’. He adds that this is an under-researched area but a very important one in relation to issues of social justice and social inclusion. ‘This project will help us understand much better what happens in these community based contexts and how we can improve the learning that takes place within them.’

Key concepts in the research are ‘learning cultures’ and ‘learning relationships’. Professor Gallacher explains that the aim of the project is to explore the elements of learning cultures and relationships that encourage people to engage with learning and contribute to success as learners. Learning relationships include not only those between tutors and learners and between fellow students, but relationships outside the classroom. For example, they include relationships with partners and family members, and relationships with friends who may not themselves be learners. In this respect, learning relationships are crucial but complex. For example, as Professor Gallacher notes, while children can be an important spur to learning, partners may be supportive or hostile, and even hostile partners can be the spur to gain the freedom which goes with new qualifications. It is this complex world of the relationship between the local community and the local learning centre which this project is investigating.

One of the crucial aspects of the research work is the involvement of staff from the colleges in the project. This began with college staff working with the researchers to identify the centres in which the research is being undertaken. It has also involved the appointment of two members of staff – one from each of the colleges – as research fellows who are now involved in all aspects of the research work, including interviewing staff and students at the community learning centres and the analysis of data. This collaboration with the colleges now involves a series of workshops with
staff and students to give feedback on the initial findings and identify possibilities for change to enhance the learning environment in each setting. This process of identifying opportunities for change, and implementing change in co-operation with the colleges is a key and innovative aspect of the project. The research team involved with this project hope that the outputs from it will have an impact not just in the colleges involved, but in the wider FE community in Scotland and beyond. ‘We want people in colleges that are not part of our project to understand the work we are doing, and we hope that this will lead to a greater recognition of the key role which community based FE can have for many adult learners‘ says Professor Gallacher.

(687 words)
“The boundaries are different out here”:
understanding the learning cultures of community based further education

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1. Background

This paper reports on some of the insights gained so far from our investigation of the nature of learning cultures in community-based further education. The project is a Scottish Extension to the Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project (The TLC) project, to whom we are grateful for their ongoing support. The overall aim of the project is to achieve enhancement of the teaching and learning experience in community learning centres (CLCs) through a deeper understanding of the learning culture, shared across all the participants in the research. These participants include the learners themselves, the CLC tutors and support staff, the college managers, and the members of the ESRC research team (which itself includes College Research Fellows, as well as the University-based team). This paper focuses on two important aspects of the learning cultures of CLCs. This is the concept of the learning field, and its impact on the nature of the human relationships – which we characterise as learning relationships – within its sphere of influence. Our analysis is taking us deeper into a depiction of learning culture as a constellation of affective variables centred around feelings, attitudes and relationships, and moving us further from conventional constructs of pedagogy and learner support.

Through detailed discussions at the initial stages of the project, it was agreed that the fieldwork would be undertaken in one CLC attached to each of two Further Education (FE) colleges in Scotland. The two CLCs that are the focus of our fieldwork are very different from each other. One is a fairly new development in the wing of a secondary school. It is a community facility that has been developed by the college, and is visibly branded as such. It is located a few miles from one of the main college campuses, and serves a fairly wide geographical area. The other has evolved from being an unemployed workers centre into a learning centre for which the college has a management responsibility. It is also located a few miles from the main college campus, but serves a much smaller local community. We think of these two CLCs as ‘learning sites’ which involves an understanding of the nature of learning and opportunities for learning. From the outset of the project, two college-based research fellows (one from each college) were appointed on a part time basis. They have become fully integrated members of the research team. Each of these research fellows is involved with activities that involve both partner colleges. This has meant that they are able to provide valuable information and insights about their own college provision, but also can explore aspects of the provision in their colleague’s college from an informed yet removed stance.

Developing a cultural and relational approach to learning

Papers emerging from the TLC project advocate taking a cultural approach to understanding learning. According to James and Dement (2003) this necessitates taking an interdisciplinary approach, particularly a blending of the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) with the work of Bourdieu. Our project is certainly characterised by its interdisciplinary nature, with researchers from backgrounds in quite separate literatures and methodological traditions attempting to employ their conceptual tools in a joint analysis of the phenomena under
investigation. Jointly we have attempted to translate from one theoretical framework to another, stripping the analytical concepts down to their essentials and arriving at a position which no longer derives from a single theoretical tradition. We have carried this attempt to arrive at consensus into our methodology, adapting interpretative phenomenological analysis to a group approach at interpretation. We are aware that there are dangers in this approach, risking the loss of theoretical coherence. However, there is a real sense in which our own research team is reflecting a learning culture in itself, and we will comment elsewhere on the contribution made to our analysis of CLC culture by the reflections on our own attempt to merge disparate research perspectives.

One of our influences was Bourdieu’s concept of field. This, we agreed, offers a way of conceptualising the relations and interactions within a learning site. It can be thought of as a ‘structured system of social relations at micro and macro level, rather like a field of forces in which positions are defined’ (James and Bloomer, 2002:5). This concept directs our attention to the social forces, both explicit and implicit, which govern and shape action within a setting, and which define subfields. This has led us towards considering the interaction of a sub field to wider fields. The sub field of community based FE ‘connect(s) with, and partly share(s) the principles of the superordinate fields’ (Grenfell and James, 1998, p.20). Here the superordinate fields include both wider FE and also the field of the communities within which learning sites are located. Much of our current analysis is attempting to relate the differences between our two learning sites to the characteristics of the superordinate fields within which they are positioned. James and Diment (2003) argue that this relationship helps us to see how certain sets of assumptions prevail in certain learning situations, how they inform the practice of tutors, learners, managers and others, and how such practices at the same time work in dialectical relationships and contribute to the maintenance of particular learning cultures.

A quite different theoretical direction from which we have arrived is that of social-constructivist pedagogy. Addressing the issue of how learning technology can support such a pedagogy, Mayes et al (2001) emphasised the importance of online dialogue and then arrived at the concept of vicarious learning. By capturing learning dialogues and making them available to new learners, an opportunity was created to provide these learners with at least some of the benefits of individual feedback, without the need for the involvement of tutors in every learning episode. New learners can gain much from observing the learning dialogues of previous learners. There are many interesting problems raised by the process of learning vicariously but a key question emerged from this work: how closely does a learner have to identify with a previous learner for vicarious learning to be effective? This led to a direct focus on the nature of the relationships between learners, and then on the nature of the relationships between learners and other kinds of people who influence a learner’s identity in the role of learner. There is a clear link between this work and the various strands of theorising that have flowed from the work of Vygotsky (1978), and the more recent influence of Lave & Wenger’s work on situated learning and communities of practice. Wenger (2005) has recently written of the horizontality of learning. In educational settings learning is traditionally viewed as a vertical process that involves a locus of control over the learning environment residing with the teaching staff. This, Wenger argues, is giving way to a more horizontal view, a process involving negotiation among learning partners.
Fowler & Mayes (1999) defined a learning relationship as existing when we learn from, or through, others. Such relationships will vary according to the characteristics of the groups involved, the context within which they operate, and the strength of the relationships. These relationships may be one of three different forms: one-to-one (eg parent – child); one-to-many (eg teacher to learners); and many-to-many (eg learning in peer groups, or networks). The strength and effectiveness of the learning will also vary within the different kinds of relationships. This categorisation formed one starting point for our analysis in the current study, which we have now developed and refined through the ongoing process of data production and analysis. Details of this process are given below.

Methods
It is within two differing CLCs that that we have sought to more fully understand the nature of the learning cultures. Data collection has been undertaken within a broadly qualitative paradigm and a number of different methodological approaches have been used. These have included a series of one-to-one interviews with learners in the two CLCs. Included in this learner sample are those who are new to the learning centre, undertaking their first course there. For many such learners, this represents the first engagement with learning since leaving school. As such, many could be described as ‘tentative’ or ‘uncertain’ learners (Gallacher et al, 2000). Also included in the learner sample, however, are those who been learning in the CLC for a number of years. Often starting off as tentative learners, they have developed stronger identities as learners, completing a number of different courses at the CLC. Including both new and more established learners in our sample enabled us to focus not only on issues of access but also on changing motivations, identity transformations and transitions.

One-to-one interviews have also been undertaken with staff in the CLCs. Our initial expectation was that teaching staff would be the primary focus of this part of the research. As the project has progressed, however, we have come to increasingly understand the key role of non-teaching staff (CLC administrators, support and janitorial staff) in the shaping of learning cultures and in the formation of learning relationships both with teaching staff and with learners. As well as the one-to-one interviews, teaching staff have completed individual reflective diaries which aim to explore that nature of teaching and learning within CLCs.

The process of data analysis
In a break from the research team’s previous approaches to methodology, for this study we have adopted a method derived primarily from health psychology and little used, to date, in educational settings. *Interpretative phenomenological analysis* (IPA) has been described by Smith (2004) in the following way:

‘IPA can be described as having three broad elements. It represents an epistemological position, offers a set of guidelines for conducting research, and describes a corpus of empirical research. In terms of its theoretical position, IPA aims to explore in detail participants’ personal lived experience and how participants make sense of that...It is phenomenological in its concern with individuals’ perceptions of objects and events, but IPA also recognises the central role for the analyst ...and is thus strongly connected to the interpretative or hermeneutical
tradition. The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world.’

The characteristic features of IPA are ideographic and inductive. Our analysis has been based on transcripts of semi-structured interviews lasting around an hour each and we have developed an iterative group method for developing the interpretations. The approach developed from IPA has strongly influenced our research focus. It has forced us to reflect carefully on the nature of the interviews we have conducted with both learners and staff in the CLCs, encouraging us to try to listen first to the affective voice of the interviewee, and then attempting to interview from a frame of reference that makes sense to the interviewee, rather than being guided by a predetermined set of constructs derived from theory.

Another key element of the analysis process has been working with those involved in the research: learners, teaching staff, and other centre staff, in the process of data analysis. This has involved a series of workshops which are attended by all members of the research team. The purpose of these workshops has been to feed back to staff and learners (both separately and together) the key emerging themes from the analysis and to validate our interpretations with them, and invite in depth discussion about these themes. Staff and learners are able to confirm or to challenge the emerging findings. Such workshops have happened at all stages of the research and will continue.

The role of teaching staff
It is clear that the relationships formed between tutors and learners are key to understanding the learning culture. Previous research undertaken by members of the research team (Gallacher et al 2000) highlights the key role that FE staff play in encouraging and retaining ‘fragile’ learners. This was an area that we wanted to develop further in this work. Analysis of our qualitative data show that all staff have a key role in shaping the culture of CLCs. In the TLC project, James and Diment argue that one key element shaping a learning site is the playing out of tutor dispositions in relation to a field (2003: 408). The TLC project has found that the role of the tutor is central in influencing learning in all types of FE sites. The nature of the influence is strongly dependent upon the dispositions and professional identity of the tutors, in relation to the context and practices of the sites where they work (Hodkinson et al 2004). In CLCs, much more than in mainstream FE, the nature of the tutor’s relationship with individual learners has a personal and affective quality. Most of the learners in CLCs describe their tutor in a course in terms which connect directly with their social, cultural and personality dimensions and hardly at all with their conventional profile as a tutor. Clearly the question of identification is all important, and the way in which tutors frame the possibilities of the learning relationship is very apparent to the learners. This can be seen in the response of this student to the question ‘what was special about [x tutor]’

Och she’s just so lovely, she’s just really, really nice and dead helpful and dead supportive, really supportive and really good at saying the right things at the right minute. See when you needed it to be said she was always there to say it. You thought brilliant because when I came here to do the interior design I had a lot of problems with my mother and I had woodworm, they had just moved me into a house, I had 3
young kids, they were 1, 3 and 5 year old when we first moved in there and we were only in there about a year or two when the whole upstairs landing was infested so I was juggling sick mother, hospital appointments, woodworm in the house, 3 young kids, husband not working and doing a course at the same time, so sometimes I came in here and I felt as if everything was on top of me and she would just notice. I’d maybe get a wee bit upset or something like that and she’s be like ‘oh I’m sorry’ and I think that’s what I needed

In these ways tutors play a key role in the shaping of learning cultures within CLCs in ways that are rarely acknowledged. For example, we have found that often tutors worked well beyond normal contractual obligations not only in the hours that they work, but in the type of work they undertook. The undertaking of emotional labour is a core part of the ‘habitus’ of the tutors who help shape the work practices and learning cultures within CLCs (see Colley et al 2002). Emotional labour has been described as “the labour involved in dealing with other people’s feelings, a core component of which is the regulation of emotions… emotional labour facilitates and regulates the expression of emotion in the public domain” (James 1989: 15). Through data generated in a series of one to one interviews and in the reflective diaries kept by teaching staff, it has clearly emerged that the way that they relate to students, and the ways and types of relationships they form with students are different from those that they would form with students on the main campus. This is described in terms of the different personal boundaries that staff maintain with learners at the CLC.

I think the boundaries are different out here and we know that from the onset. I think in the college to some extent you’re protecting yourself, you know there’s almost a kind of norm where you don’t want to be too friendly, …..certainly you seem to be less open in the college, whereas down at the community, even from my point of view, maybe it’s the subject I teach, a social science, but I tell more stories down here. I elaborate a wee bit further, I give personal experience here, whereas in the college I’m maybe a more wary of doing that, but I think the fact that I do speak up encourages other people to speak up and they know its safe to do so and people have a respect thing down here as well.

One of the CLCs involved in the study is situated in an urban area of social and economic deprivation. In this particular geographical area, participation in any form of post compulsory education is low and employment rates are below national average. The culture of the local community is not one where learning is valued or promoted. Many of the learner biographies in this CLC show that people can be living very complex lives outside the learning centre which can be beset with numerous problems including poverty and low income, drug and alcohol issues, family problems, unemployment or underemployment. It is evident from all our datasets that this wider field impacts and shapes the learning cultures of CLCs. This can be seen as the field of the community which shapes the habitus and dispositions of the learners, and makes it difficult for them to engage with the field associated with the formal FE college. However, in this context the sub-field of the CLC, which is shaped partly by the FE college, but is re-shaped by both the students and the staff within these centres has a crucial role enabling learners to overcome their uncertainties about engaging in learning of this kind. Teaching staff report trying to understand learners within this wider cultural context, whilst at the same time
teaching to a level, and being explicit about this, which is equivalent to that in the main college. They report that often far more of the learners’ personal lives, histories and difficulties are brought into the classroom and have to be addressed. Teaching staff view dealing with such issues as a central and necessary part of their job.

This in turn impacts onto approaches to teaching and learning. Analysis of the staff interviews and of the reflective diaries showed that the way that teaching staff would work in a main college and the ways they approached teaching and learning in the CLC. One social science tutor who worked in both the CLC and in the main campus reported that in the CLC his teaching style was markedly different in a number of ways. Teaching in the community takes on a far more dialogic approach. This is partly facilitated by the smaller class sizes, but also because of the different types of learners who come to the CLC. He explains:

_We really encourage people to speak up, we value their views, their opinions and their contributions to the group. I think more so in here [the Centre] than we do in the college because it’s less of a lecture in here. In the college it’s more formal, you stand at the front of the class and its mostly your own voice really, predominantly, whereas here it’s a different kind of balance, so we try and encourage folk as much as we can. ....it’s more discursive and people are joining in, you don’t feel that you’re just giving a big spiel, it’s very interactive, so the work can be just as challenging in many respects here, but the way that its put forward is slightly different, the style of it and the way its received is certainly quite different as well._

Tutors described what Hodkinson et al (2004) has termed a more humanistic student centred and supportive pedagogy in the CLCs.

_we were calling ourselves ‘tutors’ when we work here but ‘lecturers’ in the college ….I refer to myself as a tutor here, which I thinks nicer, its not so lofty and in the college the kind of lecturers, their mentality’s different and they don’t fit in so well here and they know that, they’ve maybe tried it and don’t like it, they don’t like that kind of atmosphere, I think threatened by it almost._

The students for their part are aware of this different role and comment on its importance

_The tutors, I don’t know, they’re just dead helpful. They’re good with a group, they’re good with one to ones. You always think teachers are going to look down their nose at you, well you don’t think that when you’re older, you do when you’re younger, when you’re grown up you know they’re not going to be like that, so as I said most of the time they’re just part of the class, you can have fun with them, you can joke with them or you can be serious with them and they’re there to give all the help that you need or they’ll leave you to do whatever it is, if you want to get on with it yourself, you get left to get on with it, if you need their help they’re there to help you._

_The role of non-teaching staff_
As the project progressed, it has increasingly become clear that there are another staff group in the CLCs who are key in the shaping of learning cultures and in the relationships they formed with learners. This group we have termed ‘support staff’ and include CLC managers, administrators, and janitorial staff. Members of this group are often the first people that potential learners meet or talk to. They have a key role with regard to all forms of learning relationships.

In one CLC, the physical layout has been purposefully altered so that the reception desk is clearly visible from the front door. This was done in response to the recognition of how hard it could be for local people to have the confidence to enter the CLC, so that there will be a friendly and informative person ready to greet them. In this CLC the particular member of staff is an ex-student of the Centre and lives locally. The importance of these staff in contributing to the learning culture within the college was clearly expressed by this student.

_They’re great, they’re great, without Z and Y the centre would fall to bits....Z’s great, receptionist, she keeps the centre ticking over, Y he’s the janitor and as I said the place wouldn’t be standing if it wasn’t for him, he does everything, everything, whenever Z’s not in he takes over the phones or ..._

When asked about her attitude to these staff the student’s response was

_Dead positive I suppose, really, really positive, if you’ve got a problem or you need something done, but that’s not really their jobs but they would help with anything at all. You know they’re even ready to listen to you, you know if you’ve got a wee problem in the house and you come up here and maybe you’re a wee bit upset or something like that and they’ll say ‘listen do you need a wee word? Do you need a wee minute?’ they’re just great with everything, there’s nothing I can say about them and Z she’s there to keep track of everybody as well, try and keep the attendance right, trying to keep time keeping and that to a standard..._

Another student provided further details of the supportive role of these staff

_I was just really nervous and then I came in the door and it was Z was the first one I seen and just told her what my name was and stuff and she was like ‘oh right wait and I’ll take you in’ and she took me through to the class and stuff like that and [tutor] and a few other people were already there and I was all kind of shaking and stuff because I’m quite a nervous person._

In both CLCs support staff reported working closely with students, often in a supportive role. Often they directly intervened beyond their stated job description to encourage learners to keep attending the CLC.

_If someone doesn't attend for a couple of sessions, I will give them a wee call, just to check they are OK_
Support staff are also often important in indicating and advising on the opportunities for further study, and report playing a much wider role then their job descriptions including informal support, guidance and understanding the learners in a wider context. As one Centre administrative worker jokingly commented

*We do everything here, from admin to counselling*

**Discussion**

The picture that begins to emerge from our study places at the centre of the CLC culture a field that shapes, influences and guides the formation and development of relationships between people – learners, tutors, support staff, managers. This field is itself an interplay between sub- and super-ordinate fields which bring to bear the structures and attitudes from the wider cultures of FE and the local community, and the family and peer-group cultures that all intersect to produce an individual’s *learning identity*. Within such a setting, pedagogy is defined not only by the nature of learning tasks, materials and curriculum, but rather by the relational and humanistic frame within which these are presented.

However a further important set of issue which emerge from our data relate to the relative power of the participants within the field of FE and the sub-field of community based FE. It is clear from the comments made by a number of staff, both academic and non academic, that they feel that their work is to some extent peripheral to the work of the college, and is not properly recognised and supported by at least some of the more senior and powerful staff within the college. This can then have a negative impact on the learning culture within the CLC. This can be seen in the following comment.

Yeah I think at times you feel that some areas are trying to control things that happen within the centre, maybe you can get sort of pushed into a corner to do things.....But I feel as if at times its when they need you that’s when they’ll appreciate the community at the learning centre and what we do and at times when we require help ...., you basically find that some of them just ignore you, there are ones that are good, I must admit and I have a good relationship with a few of them and everything’s seems to run smoothly, but on the other ones ...

Similar views were expressed by other staff regarding a lack of appropriate support which would enable them to provide the quality of provision they felt that students could expect. These are issues which we are raising with the colleges

Our analysis is seeking to explore how these different fields and sub-fields relate to each other, and shape the learning relationships which we suggest are central to the learning cultures of community based FE. Through working with the data, drawing on the principles of IPA analysis set out in the methods section, a possible way of classifying the relationships uncovered in our analysis so far is as follows:

- relationships that encourage learners to enter or to re-enter a formal learning situation, and assist them in gaining access into learning (*accessing relationships*):
• relationships that either facilitate or present barriers/challenges to participation in a learning activity \((\text{facilitative or blocking relationships})\):

• relationships that directly support a learner’s engagement with the learning process \((\text{formative, explorative or comparative relationships})\):

• relationships that encourage and facilitate plans for future learning activities \((\text{planning relationships})\).

Some relationships will, of course, move across these categories, or even display more than one characteristic simultaneously. Our understanding of the durability of these characterisations, and the dynamic nature of some relationships, is deepening as the research proceeds.

Staff, both teaching and non-teaching staff, do much work, often in terms of emotional labour with the learners who come to CLCs. The characteristic dispositions of people who choose to work in the CLCs are ones where this aspect of the job is recognised. Much more of life outside, and the complex and often problematic nature of learners’ lives, is explicitly brought into the centres to be shared with staff and other learners alike. The TLC project has termed this ‘baggage’ which some FE tutors try to get learners to leave at the door. Our analysis shows that it is an acknowledgement of the baggage that provides the frame within which many of the accessing and formative relationships flourish.

Community-based Learning Centres have many of the characteristics of communities of practice and they are by definition horizontal structures. However, the practice in CLCs is less likely to be characterised as educational practice but more as the practice of engaging in a shared culture of mutual support and concern for, in Wenger’s striking phrase, the trajectory of identity. The horizontalization of learning has received recent attention through the rapid development of informal learning on the internet. However, as Wenger himself points out, horizontalization does not imply that issues of power disappear.

“Progressive doctors are attempting to reconceptualize the medical consultation, not as an expert providing a service to a recipient, but as the meeting of two forms of knowledgeability that have to meet and negotiate how they inform each other. Doctor are still doctors, but the process of making their expertise effective requires this horizontal exchange” \((\text{Wenger, 2005})\).

Status is still an important construct in educational settings \((\text{Hodkinson et al 2004})\), and has a strong impact on the way in which learning experiences are described. Status provides one a way of describing a learning relationship. But within CLCs the relationship between learners and staff is much more likely to be characterised as “horizontal” than in campus-based FE. As in Wenger’s examples, a characterisation of learning relationships is the \textit{negotiation of mutual relevance} of different forms of knowledgeability. Learners, tutors and support staff negotiate with one another about how their respective experiences are relevant for each other’s learning identity. As in most communities of practice, however, the stronger the identity that is forged, the harder it is for participants to move on. This places both tutors and learners in roles that are significantly different from those found in mainstream FE.
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We would like to express our thanks to the learners and staff in the two community learning centres, without whom this paper would not have been possible. We would also like to thank members of staff and management in the two colleges involved in the project for their ongoing support for the research.

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1. Background
This paper reports on some of the insights gained so far from our investigation of the nature of learning cultures in community-based further education. The project is a Scottish Extension to the Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project (The TLC) project, to whom we are grateful for their ongoing support. The overall aim of the project is to achieve enhanced understanding of the teaching and learning experience in community learning centres (CLCs) through an exploration of the learning cultures, shared across all the participants in the research. These participants include the learners themselves, the CLC tutors and support staff, the college managers, and the members of the ESRC research team (which itself includes College Research Fellows, as well as the University-based team).

The project has been developed and is being undertaken with two partner FE colleges, both based in Scotland. Through detailed discussions at the initial stages of the project, it was agreed that the fieldwork would be undertaken in one CLC attached to each of two Further Education (FE) colleges in Scotland. One CLC is a fairly new development in the wing of a secondary school. It is a community facility that has been developed by the college, and is visibly branded as such. It is located a few miles from one of the main college campus, and serves a fairly wide geographical area. The other CLC has evolved from being an unemployed workers centre into a learning centre for which the college has a management responsibility. It is also located a few miles from the main college campus, but serves a much smaller local community. We think of these two CLCs as ‘learning sites’ which involves an understanding of the nature of learning and opportunities for learning. From the outset of the project, two college-based research fellows (one from each college) were appointed on a part time basis. They have become fully integrated members of the research team. Each of these research fellows is involved with activities that involve both partner colleges. This has meant that they are able to provide valuable information and insights about their own college provision, but also can explore aspects of the provision in their colleague’s college from an informed yet removed stance.

The short paper that we are giving here today presents some of our thoughts around the boundaries between the CLCs and the local communities in which they are located. It argues that much of learners’ social and emotional lives are explicitly brought into the centre for discussion and management by peer learners and, importantly, by staff. This has implications for the type of work that CLC staff take and do related to all aspects of learners’ lives.

Methods
Data generation has been undertaken within a broadly qualitative paradigm and a number of different methodological approaches have been used. These have included a series of group and one-to-one interviews with learners in the two CLCs. Included in this learner sample are those who are new to the learning centre, undertaking their first course there. For many such learners, this represents the first engagement with learning since leaving school. As such, many could be described as ‘tentative’ or ‘uncertain’ learners (Gallacher et al, 2000). Also included in the learner sample, however, are those who have been learning in the CLC for a number of years. Often
starting off as tentative learners, they have developed stronger identities as learners, completing a number of different courses at the CLC. Including both new and more established learners in our sample enabled us to focus not only on issues of access but also on changing motivations, identity transformations and transitions.

One-to-one interviews have also been undertaken with staff in the CLCs. Our initial expectation was that teaching staff would be the primary focus of this part of the research. As the project has progressed, however, we have come to increasingly understand the key role of non-teaching staff (CLC administrators, support and janitorial staff) in the shaping of learning cultures and in the formation of learning relationships both with teaching staff and with learners. As well as the one-to-one interviews, teaching staff have completed individual reflective diaries which aim to explore the nature of teaching and learning within CLCs.

In this paper we draw heavily on the biography of ‘Linda’. Linda is in her 30s, has a partner and two children. She articulates well many issues in the lives of learners who come to the CLCs.

Theoretical Framework
Our thinking in this work has been influenced by the work of Bourdieu. We are finding that his idea of ‘field’ and how this impacts onto people’s dispositions to learn is helping us think through and make sense of emerging themes from the data analysis. Field, we agreed, offers a way of conceptualising the relations and interactions within a learning site. It can be thought of as a ‘structured system of social relations at micro and macro level, rather like a field of forces in which positions are defined’ (James and Bloomer, 2002:5). This concept directs our attention to the social forces, both explicit and implicit, which govern and shape action within a setting, and which define subfields. This has led us towards considering the interaction of a sub field to wider fields. The sub field of community based FE ‘connects with, and partly share(s) the principles of the superordinate fields’ (Grenfell and James, 1998, p.20). Here the superordinate fields include both wider FE and also the field of the communities within which learning sites are located. Much of our current analysis is attempting to relate the differences between our two learning sites to the characteristics of the superordinate fields within which they are positioned. James and Diment (2003) argue that this relationship helps us to see how certain sets of assumptions prevail in certain learning situations, how they inform the practice of tutors, learners, managers and others, and how such practices at the same time work in dialectical relationships and contribute to the maintenance of particular learning cultures.

What do learners tell us about their lives?
Learners who attend CLCs are a not homogenous group. Biographies are different, motivations to come to the CLCs are different. However for many of the learners, as has been highlighted in previous research, issues of confidence in learning do emerge (see Gallacher et al 2000). For example, there may be little history or experience of learning within family or peer groups. We have found that issues of confidence are often complex, and are related to earlier education, family and personal lives, cultural issues (little history of participation in education with family or peers), work life etc.
Some learners explicitly told us that they would not have gone to a main college campus, even at times when this is geographically nearer but which felt culturally more remote.

Motivations to come back to learning are often complex, and not what they might seem on the surface.

For example, Linda tells us:

….do you know what I really came back here for? I got married and within a year of getting married my first son was born, he was only 2 when the next one came along and he was only 2 when the next one came along and I seemed to just be a mother and a wife for years sort of thing, and a daughter, and I was forgetting who I was, so that’s how I thought well here’s a wee opportunity, I’m not going away gallivanting all day long, I’m going to go and I’m going to find out who am I? And make some more friends which is always a good thing …

She goes on to tell us about what impact returning to learning has had on her life, and the changes in self identity that she feels have taken place:

Makes me feel good about myself, so it does, because when I look back now I can see the difference, yet I cannae believe that’s the way I used to be. You know quite withdrawn and I didn’t like to speak to people, yet here I am here saying loads…. [Before] if it was anything to do with the kids then I was right in there, but when it came to myself I kind of stepped back a bit because I just thought nobody will want to know, I’m just a mother and a wife sort of thing.

The above quote raises issues of confidence and identity. Linda had ‘forgotten who she was’. It may be that others like Linda are confident in social roles with their lives – e.g. wife, mother but lack confidence to do things for themselves. Analysis revealed that it could be hard to then manage family relationships when there is a desire for change. For example, Linda says about her own relationships with in her partner, who is not working and his reaction to her learning experiences.

so sometimes he gets really annoyed and ‘ah you’re never in!’ and I’m like ‘where do I go?’ because I don’t go anywhere apart from here, ….he’ll say you’re never in and I’ll say I’m never out and he’ll say ‘but you’re up in that centre all the time’

(Linda)

In the interview process, learners have told us about many challenging and complex issues in their lives which impact on issues of confidence. Issues related to poverty, family, mental health issues and social isolation were all raised by respondents. CLCs can play an important role in bridging gaps in people’s lives – in supporting them “back” into a more social and interactive lifestyle.

What aspects of their lives do learners bring to the CLC

What our analysis is highlighting is that far more of learners’ social and emotional lives, which at times can be quite complex, are brought into the CLCs to be shared, and managed, by both peer learners and staff - both teaching and non-teaching staff. Issues of social isolation, of confidence, of family, of lives outside are often not left at
the door of the Centre but are brought in. Linda tells us what was going on in her life when she returned to study, and how important that this was recognised by teaching staff in the CLC:

when I came here to do the interior design I had a lot of problems with my mother and I had woodworm, they had just moved me into a house, I had 3 young kids, they were 1, 3 and 5 year old when we first moved in there and we were only in there about a year or two when the whole upstairs landing was infested so I was juggling sick mother, hospital appointments, woodworm in the house, 3 young kids, husband not working and doing a course at the same time, so sometimes I came in here and I felt as if everything was on top of me and she would just notice. I’d maybe get a wee bit upset or something like that and she’s be like ‘oh I’m sorry’ and I think that’s what I needed
(Linda, A)

A major part of the work that staff do is to work with learners in these aspects of their lives – this is explicitly part of the culture of the CLC.

**What do learners want from the CLC?**

Our analysis shows that learners’ lives impact and shape what they then want from the CLC, and to some degree what they then expect from staff. A relaxed and informal environment is key, where they can work at their own pace:

see because its local as well, well you don’t know everybody, but its good to know, it’s like a wee community place, somewhere where everybody can just come and relax and see your courses, your courses aren’t like ‘you need to do...., you need to do...., you need to do’ don’t get me wrong I like to do and I like seeing results and I like getting certificates at the end of it and thinking I know I done something there. But it doesn’t have to be like that, if you wanted just to come, you just go on at your own pace anyway sort of thing, so obviously there’s people away back and there’s people away in front and things, but that doesn’t matter to anybody
(Linda)

These expectation in turn shape an idealised ‘community tutor’. It is becoming clear from our data analysis that learners want the right ‘type’ of tutor to work in a CLC – and that this involves someone who is realises that working in the CLC is not just about approaches to teaching and learners but involves working with learners whatever their starting point. Interest in the subject itself may play little part in initial motivations to return to learning which may be driven by a host of complex issues. In this regard, identity of subject specialist may take more of a back seat in the identity that a ‘good’ community tutor presents when working at a CLC. This is a theme emerging from both the learner and the staff interviews.

A good community tutor is open to the taking on and managing of more aspects of the learners’ lives that would be “the norm” in a more formal learning environment. A good tutor is one who knows and understands that biography matters. As Linda comments about one particular tutor:

Och she’s just so lovely, she’s just really, really nice and dead helpful and dead supportive, really supportive and really good at saying the right things at the right
minute. See when you needed it to be said she was always there to say it. You thought brilliant

This, she contrasts with another experience she had at the Centre as she comments about another tutor:

*I just felt that I wasn’t very comfy with her, she was just new to the college she came out of school, she was a school teacher that was her problem and she thought we were all kids* (Linda)

A good community tutor, from Linda’s perspective, is someone she feels ‘comfy’ with. This is backed up by evidence from the tutors interviews. One interesting example is notions of self-identity in the ways that staff describe themselves when working in the college and the main campus.

*we were calling ourselves ‘tutors’ when we work here but ‘lecturers’ in the college …..I refer to myself as a tutor here, which I thinks nicer, its not so lofty* (John)

John goes on to describe this in terms of the different personal boundaries that staff maintain with learners at the CLC.

*I think the boundaries are different out here and we know that from the onset. I think in the college to some extent you’re protecting yourself, you know there’s almost a kind of norm where you don’t want to be too friendly, …..certainly you seem to be less open in the college, whereas down at the community, even from my point of view, maybe it’s the subject I teach, a social science, but I tell more stories down here. I elaborate a wee bit further, I give personal experience here, whereas in the college I’m maybe more wary of doing that, but I think the fact that I do speak up encourages other people to speak up and they know its safe to do so and people have a respect thing down here as well.*

(John)

**Discussion**

We would argue that the cultures of CLCs are about teaching and learning but also about much more. We are finding it helpful to think about CLCs using the concepts of Bourdieu, as a subfield, operating in relation to two super-ordinate fields. In this paper we have focused on one aspects of this relationship – that between the CLCs and the local communities and the learners which come, and shape, the CLC. We argue that staff who work in CLCs play a key, and often little recognised role, in shaping these cultures. More specifically, teaching staff play a key role in the shaping of learning cultures within CLCs in ways that are rarely acknowledged. For example, we have found that often tutors worked well beyond normal contractual obligations not only in the hours that they work, but in the type of work they undertook. Drawing on the work of Colley and others, we would concur that often they do what has been termed ‘emotional labour’. Emotional labour has been described as “the labour involved in dealing with other people’s feelings, a core component of which is the regulation of emotions… emotional labour facilitates and regulates the expression of emotion in the public domain” (James 1989: 15). In our analysis so far it has clearly
emerged that the way that they relate to students, and the ways and types of relationships they form with students are different from those that they would form with students on the main campus. We argue that this has implications for the selection, support and development of all staff who work in such settings.

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Expanding our understanding of the learning cultures in community based further education

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Abstract
This paper presents arguments for distinctive features of the learning cultures present within community based further education. It draws on analysis of qualitative data generated through group and one-to-one interviews with staff and learners in two community learning centres attached to two Further Education colleges. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, notably the concepts of field, habitus and dispositions, we argue that community learning centres (CLCs) can be understood as a sub field which is shaped by at the wider superordinate field of FE policy and practice, as well as the habitus and dispositions of the staff and learners who attend the CLCs. We also use the concepts of learning relationships and learning careers to understand processes of motivation and engagement with learning. In this context, learning relationships exist when we learn from or through others. In the CLCs, relationships between staff and learners emerged as key. The concept of learning careers draws on symbolic interactionist theory. The concept of ‘career’ refers here to the processes through which people’s self perception changes and their involvement in certain areas of activity develops as a consequence of this interaction. Consideration of learning careers involves an exploration of the ways in which interaction with others shapes and influences an individual’s commitment to the learning process and the impact that this may have on their identity as a learner (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Gallacher et al 2002). We argue that the learning cultures of CLCs are characterised by a complex mix of both informal and formal elements. Understanding these learning contexts in greater depth has shown that there are a number of implications for policy and practice.
Background
Community based further education is an area of work which is in many respects marginal. This is true in both a physical sense of being situated at a distance from campus based provision, and in terms of its status within many colleges. As a result it has been relatively neglected in both policy discussions and research. However it is of considerable importance in implementing the widening access agenda which has been an important aspect of the policy agenda over a number of years (Gallacher et al, 2002). This paper reports on some of the outcomes from a research project – Understanding and Enhancing Learning Cultures in Community-Based Further Education – has been part of the ESRC funded Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). In it we attempt to explore the learning cultures found in community learning centres (CLCs) attached to FE colleges, with a view to helping us understand how these centres contribute to widening access to education for returning adults.

The project has involved researchers at the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRLL), Glasgow Caledonian University, working in partnership with two FE colleges in Scotland. It is a ‘Scottish Extension’ project, linked to the Phase II TLRP project Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) in Further Education.

The project has been characterised by its interdisciplinary nature, with researchers from backgrounds in quite separate literatures and methodological traditions attempting a joint analysis and interpretation of the data. The distinctive theoretical framework for the project has emerged by bringing together three perspectives to help us gain insights into the learning cultures to be found in these centres.

The work of Bourdieu, and the ways in which his approach has been utilised by our colleagues in the TLC project has been central to our own approach (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1989; James and Diment, 2003; Hodkinson et al, 2004; Hodkinson et al, forthcoming). Bourdieu’s concept of field has encouraged us to see community based FE as a sub-field which ‘connect(s) with, and partly share(s) the principles of the superordinate…’ field of FE at a national and college level (Grenfell and James, 1998, p.20). However in developing an understanding of the learning cultures within community based FE we have also explored the ways in which the personal, social and emotional lives of learners, and the dispositions and practices of both learners and staff have shaped the learning cultures which have emerged. In understanding these issues Bourdieu’s concept of habitus has been helpful. Hodkinson et al have suggested that habitus can be seen as social structures operating within and through individuals, rather than being something outside of us (Hodkinson et al, 2004). In this way we can understand the sub-field of community based FE being influenced by the communities from which learners come, and the life histories, dispositions and practices of learners and staff.

Our understanding of the dispositions and practices of learners and staff within CLCs has also been strongly influenced by another theoretical perspective, namely that of social-constructivist pedagogy. This emerged out of the work of Mayes et al (2001) on vicarious learning which led to a direct focus on the nature of the relationships between learners, and then on the nature of the relationships between learners and other kinds of people who influence a learner’s identity in the role of learner. There is a clear link between this work and the various strands of theorising that have flowed from the work of Vygotsky (1978), and the more recent influence of Lave & Wenger’s work on situated learning and communities of practice. A distinctive feature of our approach, then, is the emphasis which we place on the concept of the learning relationship, as a context for communication and interaction. A learning relationship exists when we learn from or through others, or when a human relationship has an impact on a learner’s fundamental disposition to learning. These could include relationships with others in the learning environment, or relationships with people not
directly connected to the learning, but who have an influence on how the learner views learning and whether they view themselves as learners.

A third main theoretical perspective used in this project has been developed around the idea of learning careers. The idea of learning careers draws on symbolic interactionist theory. The concept of ‘career’ refers here to the processes through which people’s self perception changes and their involvement in certain areas of activity develops as a consequence of this interaction. Consideration of learning careers involves an exploration of the ways in which interaction with others shapes and influences an individual’s commitment to the learning process and the impact that this may have on their identity as a learner (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Gallacher et al 2002).

These three perspectives have provided us with a framework which helps us understand the distinctive nature of the learning cultures found in CLCs. While Bourdieu’s ideas of field and habitus help us understand the structural forces which are shaping the CLCs, the idea of learning relationships help us understand the processes involved. The concept of learning careers has helped us understand both the processes of engagement with learning within the CLCs, and the issues associated with transition and progression which emerged as increasingly important ones as the project developed.

**Methods**

Through detailed discussions with staff from the two partner colleges it was agreed that the fieldwork would be undertaken in one community-based learning centre (CLC) attached to each college. The two partner colleges involved in this project are somewhat different from each other. College A is a college based in the city of Glasgow with a very strong history of involvement in community based learning as a central aspect of its work. College B is a college based in a large town, with a second campus in north Ayrshire which serves a number of towns and villages in the area. While this college recognises the value of community based learning it has not had such a central role in the college’s mission and strategy. These two CLCs also differ from each other in significant respects. The one attached to College A is located in a fairly clearly defined housing scheme in the north of Glasgow, and clearly serves this community. Most of the students who attend are female. The College B centre is located in an area where it serves a number of small/medium sized towns and the areas around them. While the student group is also predominantly female, more males attend this centre. The courses were chosen on the basis that they should represent a diversity of provision, in terms of subject matter, mode of attendance, levels of learner and teaching and learning styles. Included in this learner sample are those who were new to the learning centre, undertaking their first course there, and more established learners. Including both new and more established learners in our sample enabled us to focus not only on issues of access but also on changing motivations, processes of engagement with learning, identity transformations and transitions.

The methods have been mainly qualitative, combining different types of interviews, workshops with staff and students, reflective diaries and limited informal observations. Our initial expectation was that students and teaching staff would be the primary source of our data. As the project has progressed, however, we have come to increasingly understand the key role of non-teaching staff (CLC administrators, support and janitorial staff) in the shaping of learning cultures and in the formation of learning relationships both with teaching staff and with learners. As a result a significant number of interviews were conducted with these staff. They have also had a key role in organising and contributing to a significant amount of the research process, including the staff/student workshops which were arranged to review outcomes from the research at key points throughout the project.

As well as the one-to-one interviews, teaching staff have completed individual reflective diaries. The original proposal had included the observation of learning and teaching in the classrooms. However it was made clear to us that it would not be possible to undertake classroom observation because of agreements with teaching unions. We have however had
numerous opportunities for informal observation of the work which goes on in the CLCs which has usefully augmented the data obtained from interviews.

A total of 81 interviews were conducted over three phases of fieldwork, including both staff and learners. These comprised 29 staff interviews and 52 learner interviews. In all, 54 people were interviewed (20 members of staff and 34 learners). Fourteen staff members were interviewed once, three were interviewed twice, and three were interviewed three times. Of the 20 staff interviewed, 10 were from each CLC. Some of the teaching staff worked only in the CLCs, while others worked in both the CLCs and the main college campuses. Of the 34 learners interviewed, 15 were from Centre A and 19 were from Centre B; 11 were males and 23 females. Of the 34 learners interviewed, 22 were interviewed once, 6 were interviewed twice, and 6 were interviewed three times. After each phase of the fieldwork meetings workshops were held staff and students in each centre, followed by meetings with senior management in each college. At these meetings the emerging findings from the research were presented and the implications for changes in practice were discussed.

All interviews with staff and students were recorded and transcribed, and all transcriptions were available to all six members of the research team. This has produced a wealth of data regarding the dispositions and learning relationships of students and staff in the CLCs. It has also enabled us to explore the students learning careers. As the wealth of this data became apparent the research team agreed to adopt Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a means of analysing this data. This is an approach, not previously applied in educational settings, that is focussed on how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds, and the meanings that particular experiences, events and states hold for individuals (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Smith (2004) describes IPA as phenomenological in its focus on the individual’s experience, and strongly related to the interpretative or hermeneutic tradition in its recognition of the researcher’s role in interpretation. This approach to the analysis of our data is particularly relevant since a significant influence for IPA is symbolic interactionism, a theoretical perspective which also underpins our analysis of learning careers.

The characteristic features of IPA are ideographic and inductive. Our analysis has been based on transcripts of semi-structured interviews lasting around an hour each and we have developed an iterative group method for developing the interpretations. The approach developed from IPA has strongly influenced our research focus. It has forced us to reflect carefully on the nature of the interviews, encouraging us to try to listen first to the affective voice of the interviewee, and then attempting to interview from a frame of reference that makes sense to the interviewee, rather than being guided by a predetermined set of constructs derived from theory. The approach requires in-depth qualitative analysis of the data from each interview, which is produced by detailed readings and (in our case) discussions of the transcript. It is particularly suited to a context in which rich and detailed information has been obtained from a relatively small number of respondents. Our adoption of this methodology occurred after the project had been originally designed and the number of interviews conducted is very high for an IPA analysis which is challenging in its time demands. The project’s innovation in this analytical method has been to introduce a collaborative dimension to the interpretation of the interview data. Although this has added even further to the length of time required to adequately analyse each transcript, it has also meant that our interpretations have been enriched by the differing perspectives within the team. It is also an important means through which all members of the research team are equally involved in the analysis and interpretation of the data, and the conclusions which are drawn from it.

Learning cultures and learning relationships in CLCs

Using the ideas of field and habitus derived from the work of Bourdieu, and those involved with the TLC project, and the ideas of learning relationships which derive from the work of Lave and Wenger as developed by Mayes and his associates has enabled us to develop a particular understanding of the learning cultures which have developed in CLCs. The first
point we would want to make in this respect is that our research has indicated that the boundaries between the CLCs and the communities from which learners come can be seen to be more permeable than those found in the main college campuses. As a result many learners bring significant aspects of their personal and social lives, shaped by their habitus, into the CLCs. A very wide set of learning relationships, which can involve family, friends and others influence the experiences of learners in the CLCs. This is illustrated by this comment from one of the students

    when I came here ...I had a lot of problems with my mother and I had woodworm, they had just moved me into a house, I had 3 young kids, they were 1, 3 and 5 year old when we first moved in there and we were only in there about a year or two when the whole upstairs landing was **** so I was juggling sick mother, hospital appointments, woodworm in the house, 3 young kids, husband not working and doing a course at the same time, so sometimes I came in here and I felt as if everything was on top of me...(Learner, Centre A)

Similarly one of the tutors commented on the range of issues which affect students approaches to their studies.

Also I think people’s attitudes of the people at home, you know ‘my husband was laughing at me, he says I shouldn’t be here’ and sometimes that works in their favour and they say ‘well I just went home and I showed him what I could do, but sometimes there’s people, you maybe get the impression from them that their family aren’t really that concerned, their family don’t want them there or you know ‘you should be in the house’ so I think it’s a huge part of it, the people around them, their perception of education or, you know its not strict education, but the likes of the ECDL one I think what their partners think would play a huge part in, the friends that they’re with if none of their friends do that kind of thing then it’s a difficult step.(Lecturer, Centre B)

There is evidence from our interviews that as a result of the complexities of their life histories many students are lacking in confidence about their ability as learners when they first enter the CLCs. Tutors report that this creates quite different learning relationships from those generally found on the campus, and there is greater emphasis on their role in supporting learners in gaining confidence, and an identity as a successful learner. This difference is commented on by a member of staff when he says ‘…we were calling ourselves ‘tutors’ when we work here but ‘lecturers’ in the college… ’ He then goes on to suggest that here [the CLC] it’s a different kind of balance, so we try and encourage folk as much as we can’. Learners report the extent to which they value the informal and supportive nature of the culture within CLCs. They comment on the importance of relationships with tutors of relative equality, and ‘having a laugh’, rather than the more formal relationships they have been used to in education. This was summed up by one student in the following way

    The tutors are absolutely cracking, they really are. I mean they’re so, they’re totally different from teachers at school, you don’t feel like a silly wee school girl here, you feel like what you are, a grown adult learning (Learner, Centre B)

The dispositions which students bring with them into the CLCs, and the importance which they place on having an informal and supportive environment in which they can learn leads to a distinctive approach towards pedagogy. Hodkinson et al (2004) have termed this a more humanistic student centred and supportive pedagogy. It can also be understood as an aspect of the ‘horizontality’ of learning relationships which Wenger has referred to in his recent work (Wenger, 2005).

Our interviews have also shown that non teaching staff, including administrators, secretaries and janitors, have a key role in contributing to these supportive learning relationships which are an important part of the learning cultures in the CLCs. Thus one of the students when asked about her view of these staff responded in the following way.

    Dead positive I suppose, really, really positive, if you’ve got a problem or you need something done, but that’s not really their jobs but they would help with anything at all.
You know they’re even ready to listen to you, you know if you’ve got a wee problem in
the house and you come up here and maybe you’re a wee bit upset or something like
that and they’ll say ‘listen do you need a wee word? Do you need a wee minute?’
they’re just great with everything, there’s nothing I can say about them and Z she’s
there to keep track of everybody as well, try and keep the attendance right, trying to
keep time keeping and that to a standard (Learner, Centre A)

These members of staff are the ones who are in the centres on a permanent basis, whereas the
tutors will come and go for their classes. As such they can have key role for both students
and for staff, and this is clearly recognised by the students.

you have no idea what (Mary) has to put up with’ she’s everything, I swear to god if
Mary wasn’t here the centre would fall apart. She does everything. (Learner, Centre A)

Tutors and non-teaching staff play a key role in the shaping of learning cultures within CLCs
in ways that go well beyond what would normally be expected of teaching and administrative
staff. For example, we have found that often tutors worked well beyond normal contractual
obligations not only in the hours that they work, but in the type of work they undertook.
Drawing on the work of the TLC project, we have used the concept of ‘emotional labour’ to
help understand these aspects of the work of staff within the CLCs. (Colley et al 2002).
Emotional labour has been described as “the labour involved in dealing with other people’s
feelings, a core component of which is the regulation of emotions… emotional labour
facilitates and regulates the expression of emotion in the public domain” (James 1989: 15).
This type of work can be seen in the comment by one student on the support she received
from one of the non teaching staff when she first arrived at the centre

I was just really nervous and then I came in the door and it was Z was the first one I
seen and just told her what my name was and stuff and she was like ‘oh right wait and
I’ll take you in’ and she took me through to the class and stuff like that and [ tutor] and
a few other people were already there and I was all kind of shaking and stuff because
I’m quite a nervous person.

(Learner, Centre A)

Through data generated in a series of one to one interviews and in the reflective diaries kept
by teaching staff, it has clearly emerged that emotional labour of this kind is much more
central to the roles of academic staff in the centres than on the main campus. This is
described in terms of the different personal boundaries that staff maintain with learners at the
CLC when compared with the college campuses, a point made by Jason in the following
comment.

I think the boundaries are different out here and we know that from the onset. I think in
the college to some extent you’re protecting yourself, you know there’s almost a kind of
norm where you don’t want to be too friendly, ……certainly you seem to be less open in
the college

(Lecturer, Centre B)

The habitus and dispositions of staff are clearly of importance here. Most reported a
preparedness to see their roles in these terms, and this often reflected their own educational
and learning histories. It was also clear that students expected staff to conform to these role
expectations, and that staff did change as a result. Those one of the students when
commenting on a member of staff who had started of with an approach which was seen as
rather formal and difficult was seen to have changed during his time in the centre.

Aye he’s ok, he’s eased off, laughing and joking with us now, I get on alright with him
now, having a laugh with him (Learner, Centre B)

By contrast it appeared that staff who were not prepared to adapt to the culture of the CLC
had difficulties in surviving in the centres and would leave or be removed.

However it is also clear that the learning culture within the CLCs involves a negotiation with
rules, norms and expectations associated with the wider FE learning culture. In this respect
the force field of FE has an important impact on the CLC. Thus staff cannot ignore
assessment regulations, but make an attempt to reduce the initial impact of these types of constraints on students. Students also report that it is important for them that they see this, not just as ‘a wee centre’, but as a part of the college, and they positively value the achievement of qualifications which are nationally recognised through the FE system.

... instead of just saying I’m learning my computing, I think thinking about this as the college it makes you more determined to come and be here and treat it like the way I say to the kids about school ‘you have to go to school, I have to go to college’ (Learner, Centre A)

Teaching staff in the centres therefore have to balance their roles of providing a supportive and informal environment, with ones which enable students to meet the more formal requirements of the educational system provided through the FE colleges. While we have referred above to the idea of the ‘horizontality’ of relationships, Wenger himself points out, horizontalization does not imply that issues of power disappear. In these ways the learning culture and learning relationships of CLCs are characterised not just by informality and equality, but are also shaped by the force fields of the wider FE system.

Learning careers in CLCs

Our previous work on learning careers has indicated that our concept of ‘career’ draws on the work of Goffman and Becker, the complex ways in which people become engaged with a certain activities, and their perception of themselves can change as a consequence of interaction with others (Gallacher et al, 2002). Evidence from our interviews with learners confirms this idea of fairly complex learning careers. While some learners reported clear instrumental goals which led them to return to learning, often associated with improving their job prospects, many reported a lack of clear initial motivation associated with learning. For these learners the decision to begin a course at the centre was often associated with a change in life circumstances, eg the death of a relative for whom they had been caring, and a desire to do something for themselves. It might also be associated with the opportunity for their child to attend the crèche, or a desire to be more able to support their children’s school work. Friends and neighbours also emerge as important figures in providing initial information about the opportunities which exist in the centres. A complex set of learning relationships are therefore important in leading to this initial engagement with the centres. This is summed up by this comment from one of the students about how and why she started on the course

I’m getting out and meeting people because originally I was a housewife with 4 kids and being on this course it’s not just about being a wife and mother, I’ve learnt to find my own independence back again because I felt I’d lost that, and the real reason why I started this course is because I lost my father and I looked after my father 24/7 and I was introduced to this course by one of the girls who I’m quite friendly with and she told me about it and I’m really enjoying it (Learner, Centre B)

However once learners become involved in attending the centres there was evidence for the majority of increasing engagement with learning, and of growing confidence in their ability as learners. Their perception of themselves changed, and many began to develop an identity as a successful learner.

Makes me feel good about myself, so it does, because when I look back now I can see the difference, yet I cannae believe that’s the way I used to be. You know quite withdrawn and I didn’t like to speak to people, yet here I am here saying loads….

[Before] if it was anything to do with the kids then I was right in there, but when it came to myself I kind of stepped back a bit because I just thought nobody will want to know, I’m just a mother and a wife sort of thing (Learner, Centre A)

This was clearly associated with the positive learning relationships which they developed with staff, both teaching and non-teaching, and fellow students. However students also commented on the ways in which relationships could have a more negative impact on them, and this can limit their engagement with learning, or have to be negotiated if they are to continue to be...
engaged. Thus ‘Linda’ comments on the ambivalent relationship which her husband has to her attendance at the centre:

so sometimes he gets really annoyed and ‘ah you’re never in!’ and I’m like ‘where do I go?’ because I don’t go anywhere apart from here, because I’ve always been, 3 kids, I don’t ask anybody to baby sit my 3 kids, so he’ll say you’re never in and I’ll say I’m never out and he’ll say ‘but you are up in that centre all the time’ but he doesn’t really mean it that way, its just sometimes I think that’s the only way he get to me sometimes (learner, Centre A)

Relationships with other students are generally commented on in a very positive way, and as one which contributes to the development of learning careers. However it has also been noted that these relationships can also become more negative if the dynamic within the class changes. Thus ‘Elizabeth’ having commented in her first interview about the positive role of her class mates in the learning process, in her second interview noted a change in these relationships which was now contributing to a decision to leave the centre ‘…like people not getting on and its not just one or two of us, its like half the class is like split up, well there’s an atmosphere.’

While there was a great deal of evidence of the success of the centres in encouraging students to engage with learning, there was some evidence that the centres may be less successful in supporting transition to other learning opportunities or to new opportunities in the labour market. There was evidence of students spending a number of years in the centres, and attending a range of different courses. In the process their self confidence and engagement with learning increased, but they did not move on to further study in the college, or elsewhere. This can of course be for a number of reasons, for example family commitments, and for some students this decision to stay in the centre could represent a positive choice. It can also be associated with practical difficulties, for example Centre A is several miles from the college, and difficult to reach by public transport. However for a number of students their continued attendance in the centre seemed to be associated with the centres becoming a ‘comfort zone’ for them, from which they found it difficult to move on. This was also associated in some cases with a lack of clear information and perception of the realistic alternatives, and a lack of structures which would facilitate their transition to further study, or an improved position in the labour market. This uncertainty can be seen in this comment by Linda, who at this point had been in the centre for six years, and had clearly developed a very strong identification with it.

Yes see which way direction I’m going to go in. I could maybe go back to interior design because I did like it and I said, I’ve worked in an office before as well and I said I would never ever work in an office again, but see with me being so good with the computing maybe I’ll go that way, I don’t know yet, I really don’t know yet (Learner, Centre A)

In other cases there was evidence of students making the transition to a campus based course, but this did not prove to be successful. Thus Carol, who had come to the centre with a clear aim of improving her qualifications to move from a job in a supermarket to an office job, left the centre to study in another college. However by Christmas she had left this college, and when last interviewed was about to return to another supermarket job. She attributed her decision to leave the college to a feeling that she was having to repeat work she had already done to achieve an HNC before progressing to an HND. However she was also clearly not happy with the experience of studying in the college:

The lecturers at college, I don’t know it’s going to say, they were pompous. They were ‘I’m the lecturer, you’re the student, you’ll listen’. Whereas the lecturers here, they’ll have a laugh and a giggle with you. Do you know what I mean? You seem to forget that they are lecturers, the one’s here. Whereas the one’s at the college you couldn’t forget, because they wouldn’t allow you. Do you know what I mean? So that was another difference.
As a result she commented that while her hopes had been ‘away up’ they were then ‘dashed back down’.

This raises issues regarding the level of support and guidance which students receive to enable them to make these transitions more successfully. Centre B did have a member of staff with a clear remit to provide guidance to students with regard to progression, and this was positively regarded by students. This issue of progression and transition was raised with staff within the centres and the colleges, and initiatives to address this including improved guidance, college visits and mentoring are being put in place.

**Force fields at work on CLCs**

We have suggested that the community based learning within FE can be understood as a sub-field which is in considerable measure shaped by the super-ordinate field of further education. For the CLCs one clear implication of this was that what happened in the centres was in considerable measure influenced by the place of community based learning within the college, and the status which it had. As we have indicated above there are considerable differences between the colleges in this respect. In college A, community based learning was a more central aspect of the college’s strategy, and the links between the CLC and the college campus were relatively strong with a number of campus based staff having clear responsibilities for the work of the centre, and regular involvement with it. A significant number of academic staff who worked in the centre were relatively experienced full-time campus based staff. However even in this centre provision was limited, and, as has been indicated above, the arrangements to provide support for students in moving on from the centre were relatively limited.

In College B, where community based learning is a less central aspect of college strategy, relationships between the centre and the college were less clearly defined, and centre staff appeared to be more peripheral to the work of the college, with limited control over issues such as staffing and the provision of courses. This had implications for their ability to plan provision to meet learners’ needs.

Underlying many of the issues regarding the place and status of community based provision are questions regarding the funding arrangements within which colleges operate, and the extent to which senior managers do not perceive these as being supportive of community based provision. This issue has been discussed with senior staff in both colleges, and it has been agreed that it should be raised with relevant staff in the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and meetings have been held to explore these issues.

The issues associated with the status of community based learning have been raised with senior staff in both colleges. This has resulted in discussions at the Academic board in college B, where community based learning has traditionally been less central, and the Associate Principal who is now responsible for this area has been involved in detailed discussions about how the outcomes from the project can inform the development of college policy. Discussions have also taken place with senior staff in College A to discuss how the college’s community based strategy can be strengthened in the light of the outcomes from this project.

**Summary**

In this paper we have presented arguments for distinctive features of community based further education. Using perspectives derived from Bourdieu, notably dispositions, habitus and field and the concepts of learning careers and learning relationships we have shown the interaction of structure and process in realism to motivation and engagement with learning. We argue that CLCs are characterised by informality and that this is a key cultural characteristic. Boundaries with the communities – with dispositions, habitus and wider relationships of learners – are more permeable and much more of learners’ lives are brought into the CLCs. Staff play a complex role, being both subject specialist and undertaking ‘emotional labour’.
CLCs are also shaped by the superordinate field on the college and FE brings elements of formality – some of which are welcomed by the students. It is in this complexity that CLCs are best understood. There are implications for staff support as well as leaner transitions.
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DOING COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH TO ENHANCE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN COMMUNITY BASED FURTHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY WITHIN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH PROGRAMME (TLRP)

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This paper is based on the experience of working collaboratively with staff in two further education (FE) colleges to undertake research which is designed to investigate the culture of support for staff and learners within community based learning centres, and through this understanding to enhance the learning experience of the students involved. The research is being undertaken as part of the major UK-wide Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The paper reports on the experience of undertaking collaborative research of this kind, and on some of the issues which this raises.

CONTEXT
There are two important contexts for this study which are of particular relevance from the point of view of this paper. The first is the framework created by the TLRP, while the second is the context created by policy, practice and existing research regarding the issue of community based learning.

TLRP is unique in the history of educational research within the UK. It is a very large and complex programme, with a budget in excess of £30 million, and covering all aspects of education, from pre school to senior citizens, and including informal and non formal learning as well as institutional learning. As a programme which is administered through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the UK’s main research council for the social sciences, it places a heavy emphasis on the quality of the proposals, the research and the outputs associated with the programme. However there are a number of features of the programme which contribute to its distinctiveness. The first is the emphasis which it places on the enhancement of learning and teaching as an outcome of all projects. It is not enough that the research increases our knowledge and understanding of the aspect of learning which we are studying, but a central objective of the projects must be to encourage change which will enhance the learning process. Secondly there is an emphasis on collaboration within the programme. Where possible, collaboration with the organisations in which the research will be undertaken is encouraged. The aim should be to seek the close involvement of staff from these organisations in all appropriate aspects of the project. This will help ensure that the outcomes of the project do have an impact on practice. It can also contribute to the third important priority, which is capacity building. Through these forms of close collaboration the programme seeks to ensure that the capacity for future research in the institutions and organisations involved in the study will be enhanced. From this point of view one of the aims is to involve staff actively in the research, increase their knowledge and understanding of the research processes and enhance their capabilities. It these ways a continuing legacy can be left after the projects have been completed. These aspects of the programme have all helped shape the distinctive nature of the project which is discussed in this paper, and the other TLRP projects within Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRLL) which formed the starting point for this conference.

The second important set of contextual issues which have shaped the development of this project have been the growing emphasis on community based further education in lifelong learning policy in Scotland (Scottish Parliament, 2002). This has been particularly associated with policies which are designed to widen access and promote social inclusion, which have been important priorities for the Scottish Executive in recent years (Scottish Office, 1998; Scottish Office, 1999a; Scottish Office, 1999b; Scottish Executive, 2003). In this context the role of the further education colleges has been
increasingly recognised (Raab and Davidson, 1999; and Raab and Small, 2003). The contribution of the colleges in this respect, and particularly the contribution of community based provision, was explored by two members of this research team in an earlier study funded by the Scottish Executive. This pointed to the considerable success of the FE colleges, and particularly the community based learning centres, in attracting adult returners from under-represented groups back into education, although the focus of this study was more on issues associated with access and participation, than with ones which focused on learning (Gallacher et al, 2000; Crossan et al, 2003). Issues associated with learning and learning cultures within FE colleges have, however, been the focus for another TLRP project, the Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) project. While this is a large project which covers a number of aspects of the work which goes on within the FE colleges, however, it does not have community based FE as a central focus of its work. The project reported on in this paper is a ‘Scottish Extension’ of the TLC project, funded within TLRP by the Scottish Executive to develop the work of the TLC project within the field of community based FE.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for the project has been outlined in other papers produced by the project team (eg Duncan et al, 2004), and will be discussed only very briefly here because of constraints of space, and because the main focus of this paper is on the process of undertaking collaborative research which is designed to enhance policy and practice.

An understanding of learning cultures is central to the research. A distinctive feature of our approach is the emphasis which we place on the concept of learning relationships. This builds on the earlier work of Fowler and Mayes (1999), and is derived from the broad assumptions of situated learning. This project draws on two themes associated with situated learning (Barab and Duffy,1999). One is a socio-psychological view of situativity which emphasises the importance of context-dependent learning in informal settings. The second is a social anthropological theme in which the influence of a wider social context is emphasised (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Across these themes, the focus shifts from the learner's relationship with the direct activities of learning to the learner’s relationship with a wider but identifiable group of people, and to the wider practice. Exploring learning relationships, therefore, is a crucial element in the research. A learning relationship exists when we learn from or through others, or when a relationship has an impact on a learner's fundamental disposition to learning. These could include relationships with others in the learning environment (eg tutors/lecturers, other learners); or relationships with people not directly connected to the learning, but who have an influence on how the learner views learning and whether they view themselves as learners.

The project is also an extension of the Phase II TLRP project Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) in Further Education. In developing their approach to learning cultures, the TLC project team has drawn on the work of Bourdieu, and his ideas of habitus, field and capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1989). We wish to explore the extent to which these ideas can help us understand more deeply the contexts which help shape learning relationships and interactions within community based FE. The concept of the authentic learning site used by the TLC project is also helpful in understanding the importance of learning relationships. Authors from the TLC project recommend that studies of learning must not simply focus on temporally or spatially prescribed learning sites. Rather, they emphasise the need to recognise authentic learning sites, which ‘include, potentially, much of what is recognised in formally prescribed learning opportunities but they also include much that is not prescribed such as home, peer group, and personal relations, accidents, career and other aspirations, and even sleep’ (James and Bloomer, 2001, p.7). They describe how such learning sites are situated within a range of wider networks, and as such must be explored and understood in terms of such situativity.

The third main theoretical perspective used in this project has been developed around the idea of learning careers. The idea of learning careers draws on symbolic interactionist theory, and the processes through which social identity is shaped and reshaped through interaction with others (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Gallacher et al 2002). The concept of ‘career’ refers here to the processes through which people’s self perception changes and their involvement in certain areas of activity develops as a consequence of this interaction. Consideration of learning careers will involve an exploration of the ways that interaction with others (learning relationships) shapes and influences an individual’s commitment to the learning process and the impact that this may have on their identity as a learner (disposition to learning).
These three perspectives will help us understand how learning cultures are shaped and changed, and the implications of this for learners’ dispositions towards, and engagement with, learning.

IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT

Developing a collaborative relationship with colleges
The first stage of the project was one in which the university based research team sought to establish a shared understanding of the project’s aims with appropriate staff in the two FE colleges which had agreed to participate in the project. These two colleges were chosen on the basis of various criteria. Firstly they were contrasting in character. One (Anniecland College) is a city college based in Glasgow, while the other (James Watt College, North Ayrshire Campus), serves a number of small towns and a more rural surrounding area. Both have a commitment to community based provision, although this is more central to the mission of the Glasgow college. In both cases there were already well established links with the colleges, in terms of joint work or previous research, and these could be build on in developing this research project. After the colleges had agreed to participate a series of meetings were held with senior staff and other staff responsible for community based provision drawn from each college. Most of these meetings were joint with staff from both colleges and were hosted in one of the colleges. The meetings were used to ensure that college staff understood and were committed to the objectives of the project, to agree about the implementation strategy, and to identify the learning centres in which the research would be carried out. It was agreed that the research would be carried out in one learning centre attached to each of the two colleges. These meetings also led to the agreement of procedures for the appointment of the two part-time college based research fellows who are funded through the project.

College-based research fellows
The project proposal and budget has provision for a college based research fellow (CBRF) in each college. While the limited funding available means that this only covers one day per week for each CBRF these colleagues have a valuable contribution to make to the work of the project. In the first place there are the insights and understandings which come from their current role as working members of the lecturing staff within the FE colleges. Secondly they are an important part of the capacity building activity of the project in that the research experience they gain from working on the project will continue to be available to the colleges after the project is completed, and it is hoped that the colleges will find ways of utilising and building on this experience. Senior college staff and CRLL staff were involved in the appointment procedures for the two CBRFs.

An important objective for the CRLL based research team has been to ensure that the two CBRFs are as fully integrated into the research team as possible. This has involved regular team meetings where all aspects of the project implementation strategy are discussed and agreed. The two CBRFs have been fully involved in the project fieldwork, and the analysis of data. They have also been encouraged to attend research training events organised by the TLRP and other relevant organisations, to attend the TLRP annual conference and CRLL forums and conferences.

Selecting learning sites
The two community learning centres (CLCs) were identified in co-operation with our partner colleges after consideration of the various options. While both are community based, the characteristics of the two centres differ in significant ways. One is a fairly new development in the wing of a secondary school. It is a community facility that has been developed by the college, and is visibly branded as such. It is located a few miles from one of the main college campuses, and serves a fairly wide geographical area, including a number of small towns in the area. The other has evolved from being an unemployed workers centre into a learning centre for which the college has a management responsibility. It is also located a few miles from the main college campus, but serves a much smaller local community. The centre also has a number of other functions in the local community, which includes providing the base for a local food co-op, however, local knowledge about the existence of this learning centre, and its link with the main college would appear to be relatively patchy.

Two courses were identified in each of the CLCs, and interviews were sought with learners and staff associated with all four courses. The courses were chosen on the basis that they should represent a diversity of provision, in terms of subject matter, mode of attendance, levels of learner and teaching and learning styles. These courses are: introductory computing; European Computer Driving licences (ECDL), a more advanced computing course; interior design; introduction to counselling.
Fieldwork and data analysis
The main focus of the first phase of the fieldwork was to explore the learning relationships which are of importance to our respondents, and their contribution to the learning culture within the CLCs. We have conducted three group discussions with learners, and 23 one-to-one interviews with learners and staff. The interviews were life history interviews in which we have explored the factors which contribute to their specific experience of learning, the influences on learning in their lives and their experience of learning in community-based FE. All members of the research team, including the CBRFs have undertaken interviews with staff or students.

The approach to data analysis used within the project is based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This is an approach that is focussed on how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds, and the meanings that particular experiences, events and states hold for individuals (Smith and Osborn, 2003). It requires in-depth qualitative analysis of the data from each interview, which results in detailed readings and discussions of each transcript. It is therefore particularly suited to a context in which the emphasis has been on obtaining rich and detailed information from a relatively small number of respondents. This has been a very challenging task not least because of the amount of data to be analysed, but importantly because of the multi-disciplinary nature of the research team. Although this has contributed to the length of time required to adequately analyse each transcript, it has also meant that our interpretations have been enriched by the differing perspectives within the team. It is also an important means through which all members of the research team are equally involved in the analysis and interpretation of the data, and the conclusions which are drawn from it.

OUTCOMES FROM THE FIRST STAGE, AND IDENTIFICATION OF POSSIBLE AREAS OF CHANGE
The main outcome of the first phase of the fieldwork has been the identification of a number of learning relationships which appear to have been important in shaping the learning experience of our recipients. These can be summarised as follows: earlier educational experiences; family relationships; relationships within the community; peer learning relationships; staff-student relationships; staff-college relationships; CLC-college relationships; staffs’ learning relationships. These relationships have been more fully explored in other papers which have been written by members of the research team (Duncan et al, 2004; Mayes and Crossan, 2005) and in this paper we will focus on considering their implications for change within the colleges and the ways in which we are seeking to encourage change. The possible areas for change identified by the research team have been grouped under three main headings: the relationships which mediate between CLCs and their community, those that shape the role of the tutor in the CLC, and thirdly the nature of the support provided to tutors which both directly influences their relationships, and indirectly enhances their understanding of the importance of learning relationships in general.

The first of these, then, focused on the issue of the relationship between CLCs and community. Under this heading the first issue identified is the key role of non-teaching staff in encouraging access, and supporting learners. This includes CLC managers, administrators, and clerical staff, janitors and others who have important roles in running the centre, and contributing to its ambience. Such people are often the first point of contact for potential students and provide continuing support for students when they are enrolled on courses. However the importance of their contribution can be underestimated, and an important question is how can these roles be adequately recognised and enhanced. The second issue identified under this heading is the importance of the role of family relationships in supporting learners. The relationships which have been identified by our respondents include those with their children, their parents, especially mothers, their sisters and their partners. The effects of relationships with partners, as might be expected, are somewhat mixed. In some cases partners are positive and supportive, in others they are ambivalent or even hostile. This then raises the issue of the need to recognise the importance of these relationships and consider ways in which they can be built upon. The third issue under this heading is the importance of informal community networks in encouraging learners to return to study, and in supporting them when they are there.

The second area was one which focused on differences between the tutors’ role in CLCs and on the main campus. Again a number of issues can be identified. The first of these is that the tutors’ role within the CLC if often a less formal teaching role and there is more emphasis on their role in supporting uncertain and fragile learners become more confident in their identity as learners. In this context the tutors’ role is less clearly that of subject specialist, and is a more encompassing role of
student support. Associated with this there are often rather different approaches to formal assessment. While these assessments are still important if the learners are to successfully complete their units and gain credit the emphasis on assessment is often down played until tutors are confident that learners are ready to cope with these pressures. The final issue under this heading is that staff have commented on the fact that because of the heterogeneous nature of the student groups, they are often working at different levels in same class, and this places additional demands on them. Overall then the role of the community based tutor can be seen as a demanding one, which is in important ways different from the college based tutor, and there is a need to recognise this in the support which colleges provide for these tutors.

This is the third area which our analysis focused on: support for community based staff. Again a number of issues have been identified. The first of these concerned the procedures through which staff are identified and selected to work within CLCs. At present there is a variety of staff who work in these centres. Some are full-time college staff with a special responsibility for community based provision. Some are full-time staff who work in these centres on a more ad hoc basis, and some are part-time staff who may either be recruited especially to work in these centres or may combine this with part-time work in the main college campus. Given the demanding roles which these tutors have it is important that the colleges have appropriate procedures to select staff who will be able to respond to the challenges associated with these positions. A related issue is the need for induction programmes which take account of distinctive needs and roles of CLC staff. Linked to induction programmes is the need for continuing staff development/training programmes which recognise the distinctive issues associated with community based learning and provide support for the staff in these centres. Finally under this heading there is the question of how increased opportunities for peer support can be provided. Given that many of these staff are part-time, there are fewer opportunities for the informal contact which is often an important part of the staff support systems for campus based staff. There is therefore a question regarding how enhanced opportunities of this kind can be provided.

FEEDBACK FROM WORKSHOPS WITH STAFF AND STUDENTS

Following this process of analysis a number of workshops have been held with staff and students to feedback the outcomes from this first fieldwork stage, and explore further the opportunities for change.

The first set of workshops took place in the CLCs. These were multi-stage events which involved both staff and students. Members of the research team met firstly with students and staff separately, to outline the emerging findings and the possible areas for change which had been identified. The outcomes of these discussions were then summarised, and a joint session with staff and students was held. The response from staff and students to sessions in both centres was very positive.

The second set of workshops were organised with senior college staff, and staff with a special responsibility for community based provision within the colleges. These were designed to provide feedback on the outcomes from first stage of fieldwork and from staff/student workshops. They were designed to enable senior staff to work with members of the research team in identifying possible areas of change, and to consider how change can be introduced. In one college, two of these meetings have taken place, while in another the issues were dealt with at one meeting. These meetings have also been very positive and constructive in tone, and have provided an opportunity for detailed discussion of the opportunities which exist to enhance community based provision. Following these meetings the college staff have drawn up action plans.

THE NEXT STAGES OF THE RESEARCH

The research is now in the second fieldwork stage. Within the constraints of this paper this will not be discussed in any detail. It will include the following elements:

- observation of the implementation of programme of change in colleges/CLCs;
- observation of the impact of these changes on students and staff in CLCs;
- further fieldwork with learners and staff to deepen our understanding of learning relationships and their impact on learning cultures;
- examination of how learning relationships change;
- examination with learners of factors which have facilitated or inhibited learning over past year.

CONCLUSIONS
This paper has sought to outline an approach towards developing a research project which is
designed to enhance practice through a collaborative relationship with the colleges in which the
research is being undertaken. The recognition of the importance of this type of research is witnessed
by the level of investment in TLRP as a national research programme which is designed to influence
practice. The research reported here represents an attempt to implement the philosophy underlying
TLRP. Key elements in our approach have been the establishment of a very strong relationship with
our partner colleges to ensure a shared understanding of the objectives of the project. This has been
built on positive relationships between members of the university based research team and the
colleges involved. The role of college based research fellows, and the efforts to integrate them fully
into the work of the research team has also been of great importance. The research team has also
tried to ensure that agreeing on a programme of changes to practice, on the basis of outcomes from
the research, has been a process in which staff and students have been fully involved.

We are now entering a key phase of the project in which we will observe the extent to which it
possible to introduce changes which will affect practice, and the issues associated with introducing
change of this kind. Outcomes from this stage could be of considerable value in developing this
model. We are also considering ways in which this approach can be more widely applied in links
between university based researchers and FE colleges to strengthen research capacity in the FE
sector.

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Exploring some ideas of ‘partnership’ in community based further education

Lorna Smith (James Watt College) and David Watson (Anniesland College),

The focus on ‘partnerships’ for this issue of Broadcast made us reflect on our roles as college lecturers who are seconded on a part time basis to work as part of a university based research team. The focus of the research is to deepen our understanding of community based further education. The project runs over 3 years, and will finish in October 2006. The relationships and partnerships we have developed over the time of the project have been crucial in shaping our research and we feel it is worth outlining some of their key features.

Firstly, there is ‘partnership’ within our research team. The team comprises ourselves as two college based Research Fellows, two university-based Research Fellows and two project directors. In the FE sector we are often ‘researched upon’ by others rather than researching our own sector. Although the team is led by Glasgow Caledonian University we do feel that this is an example of a way to build research capacity for FE staff. We have been fully involved in all aspects of the project, and have received ongoing research methods training. Overall we feel that this partnership between a university and two colleges has been working effectively - each member of the team brings different knowledge and experience and this six-way team partnership allows a unique voice to emerge. Having college staff intimately involved with the minutiae of the project allows depth to develop that, in other circumstances, would not be so prominent. As college-based Research Fellows, we have felt very much involved in all aspects of the work and have been pleased at the increasingly equal role we play within the team. We hope that the experience gained will be valuable for FE in the future.

A second idea of partnership is the ways that we have been working with the two community learning centres involved in the research. This is obviously a crucial relationship. Over a period of almost three years this partnership has built up a degree of cooperation and trust, with team members getting to know both teaching and non-teaching staff as well as students in each centre. Some of the students interviewed in earlier phases of fieldwork have now progressed from the centres either into paid employment or to main college campuses. The learning centres have played an important role in giving the project team access to students
over this period and in providing a focal point for the interviewing strategy. By interviewing both teaching and non-teaching staff over the years we feel that we have a greater understanding of the complexity of the work that all staff undertake in community learning centres.

The centres themselves are also working in partnership with external agencies including local Job Centres, Addiction Services, Women’s Aid and homeless services. These partnerships ensure that the centres are meeting demands from their local communities and providing a dependable service. It creates a complex web of partnerships which all contribute to the unique cultures of the centres themselves. Another form of partnership is that between the learning centres based in distinct physical locations and the main college campuses. Staff in each of the locations liaise closely to ensure smooth running of courses, arranging tutors and identifying future demand for courses. This is another crucial relationship – in our project, one of the aims has been to explore the ways in which these relationships work and to enhance the profile of the work undertaken in the centres. In doing so, we hope that the profile of the community learning centres has been enhanced and better understood.

The idea of ‘partnership’ is proving to be an important one in our research. We have conceptualised this in terms of the various relationships we can identify in the research settings. These include not only relationships between institutions, but also between learners and staff, and not only between learners and teaching staff, but also between learners, teaching and non-teaching staff.

The notion of ‘partnership’ as a theoretical concept embodies ideas of even and equal relationships. However, this is not always the case in reality. Partnerships are often contested relationships, involving inequalities of both power and status. In some cases this may be true of the relationship between community based learning centres and the main campus, with the centres appearing to be rather peripheral to the work of the college.

What is emerging from our work is that the cultures in community based learning centres are conducive to the development of ‘partnerships’ existing between different types of staff, and between staff and learners. Both groups have indicated in interviews the strong feelings of a ‘caring’ and ‘supportive’ atmosphere in the centres, where relationships of trust are high and inequalities of power and status are often consciously underplayed.
One of our findings is that non-teaching staff at the centres play a critical role in forming their own kind of partnerships – firstly, with teaching staff, and also with learners. Their role is important in supporting and nurturing relationships of trust and competence within the centres and for providing important links with main college campuses. They appear to balance the coordinating and caring relationships in the centre with their ultimate accountability to main college management for student enrolment numbers and provision of courses.

The key partnerships are even more extensive when we consider the contribution played by family members to learning cultures. Many staff and learners report the importance of family in giving support – both practical and emotional – for promoting strong feelings of motivation and commitment. Interestingly, non-supportive family members can prove equally motivating for individuals!

The notion of ‘partnership’ is a useful one for understanding the range, depth and quality of relationships in FE and helps to offer insight into the distinct learning cultures of community based centres. The richness of our research derives from an appreciation of the differences that characterise each set of partnerships. There are checks and balances, motivators and rewards. With the notion of ‘partnerships’ comes the idea of trust and cooperation to meet joint aims, but also the idea of accountability, responsibility, diversity and challenge. It is the diversity of the partnerships that enriches the research process and that proves most challenging in terms of the different agendas that are promoted and the compromises that have to be reached.
**Resulting Publications**


### List of data files

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Coder’s instructions

A simple coding system has been used for this dataset as follows.

L = Learner
S = Staff member
0-999 = number of individual learner or staff member
A, B, C = number of interview conducted with that person

e.g. L33A = Learner 33, 1st interview
     L33B = Learner 33, 2nd interview
     S01C = Staff 01, 3rd interview