Lifelong Learning and the Learning Culture of a College Flexible Learning Centre

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Abstract

This study aims to address a gap in knowledge about Further Education college flexible learning centres and their contribution to lifelong learning. Flexible learning centres were established as a response to the lifelong learning agenda of the 1990s and are now in the front line in responding to government initiatives to improve employability and foster social inclusion. Their tutors work in a contested area where the boundaries between teaching and supporting learning are blurred and the learning achieved may be undervalued by the Inspectorate and college authorities.

This study adopts a qualitative approach of narrative inquiry to analyse the learning culture of the Flexible Learning Centre (FLC) of Hollypark College, focusing on 15 learners' and 2 tutors' narratives elicited by episodic interviews. The narratives of learning biographies and work biographies of learners and tutors are explored, supplemented by quantitative data from College databases.

The study evaluates the ways in which the pedagogical approach of self-directed study with tutor support appears to be successful for predominantly mature learners wishing to acquire mainly Information Technology (IT) skills which may enhance their chances of employment or benefit them in other ways. Building on recent work on learning cultures, social capital, well-being and identity theories, the study gives a voice to these learners who are so far

unheard and despite the demographic population shift to increasing numbers of older people, are not the focus of current government policy initiatives. Focus on employability which is equated with acquiring skills is seen as too narrow to encompass the wider needs met and benefits accrued by attending the FLC.

The findings are that this FLC's approach is particularly effective for older learners in general in acquiring IT skills. Those made redundant, the retired, those in work and carers who may have been out of the workforce for some time may flourish in this learning environment where mainstream courses cannot offer equivalent flexibility and opportunities to structure their own learning. The learning culture of the Flexible Learning Centre provides a space where such learners may not only acquire IT skills but may also increase their social and cultural capital while opening up new horizons for their future. Tutor/learner relationships are of key importance and the learning taking place should be re-evaluated by the Inspectorate and government alike.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Hollypark College Organisational Context

Since 2001 I have held a management post which includes, among other areas, responsibility for a flexible learning centre in a further education college. Researching the FLC offered the opportunity to explore an area of college provision which sits uneasily within the overall framework of the college curriculum and operates differently from the still largely traditional college world of fixed length courses and a one year fixed academic calendar. By contrast the FLC offers flexibility in enrolment times and patterns of study.

As a practitioner, the research has given me the opportunity to understand more deeply why learners come to the FLC and what it can offer to them. Before this research was undertaken, there had been no research into the learners or the Centre.

Hollypark College is a community college in a major Scottish city and was founded in 1947. By the time the Flexible Learning Centre was set up in 1996 the College had been incorporated as a semi-independent organisation, no longer under the control of the regional authority. The College served communities in what are now three local authority areas and had a wide range of full and part-time courses in vocational subject areas along with a large provision of Highers and A Levels for school leavers. The College was structured into several schools and the FLC was originally a kind of Cinderella

annexe to the College School of Information Technology and Business Studies with staff withdrawn to what was perceived as the more important realm of traditional classroom teaching whenever a staffing crisis occurred in the parent school. The FLC was finally recognised as distinct from the parent faculty in 2002 with staff managed within a Learning Development Unit which I head. This has had several effects in the development of the identity of the FLC which will be explored later.

As a manager, undertaking the research placed me in the ambivalent position of researcher interviewing the tutors and support staff who are part of my team. I was conscious of the tensions this could create and of the difficulty of moving from my managerial role to the role of interviewer.

The Flexible Learning Centre

The Flexible Learning Centre, which is sited in Hollypark College's LITEhouse Learning Centre, is a branded Learndirect Scotland centre which offers tutor-assisted self-study IT courses and some online Sage Payroll and Accounts courses along with a few Learndirect short online courses. Learndirect Scotland is essentially a government funded learning broker which directs learners to appropriate courses and centres but has also produced some limited online course materials. The FLC may participate in Learndirect initiatives and must comply with Learndirect quality standards. Materials for self-study are, for most courses, in hard copy folders which the learners use in

the FLC or can purchase to study at home. Most courses are at three levels: Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced. The European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) is offered in the form of CD materials which can be used in the FLC or at home. In its current version, LITE officially stands for Learning, Information Technology and Employability and in its stress on employability reflects current government drivers. I have explored what kind of learning is taking place in the FLC and critiqued its status and have tried to discover who the learners are in terms of social and economic background, learning trajectories and life histories and how their stories fit with the FLC's avowed aim of increasing their employability. I have examined the whole assumption that employability is something attainable in this context and have also looked at how the tutors construct their identities and how they view their own roles.

Research Questions

In undertaking this research, the aim was to illuminate the learning culture of a College flexible learning centre in the context of the lifelong learning and employability and skills policy agendas. By doing this I hoped to explore learner identities in the FLC through the medium of narrative and evaluate what coming to the FLC meant for the learners and staff and to explore if there were possible benefits in this type of learning, not necessarily purely confined to developing employability. In order to do this, four research questions were formulated originally as follows:

- What is the relevance of employability and acquisition of skills to learners in the FLC?

- What is the relevance of employability and acquisition of skills to staff in the FLC?

- How do FLC tutors view their practice?

- How do FLC learners view their learning and how does it relate to the rest of their lives?

The first two questions were designed to focus on the issue of the importance colleges have been asked to give to fostering employability and skills and to explore if this is what is actually being sought by those coming to the Centre. The questions were intended, as Stake (1995: 17) puts it, to help to 'understand the complex life of the case'. These questions led to an initial consideration of policies in lifelong learning which were discussed as a framing for the FLC case study within the context of Scottish Further Education. The relationship between policies and practice was explored to see how far this determined the portfolio of courses and the general thrust of how teaching and learning happened in the Centre. These questions could perhaps be seen as relating to what Stake (2006: 10) describes as 'foreshadowed problems' i.e. questions arising from a topical concern. In this case the concern is that the government stress on employability and skills acquisition as leading to economic competitiveness is possibly problematic in the FLC context. In the context of College strategy, it had been assumed by management that all areas of the College should demonstrate that learners were working towards

improving their employability and skills and this would be evidenced by their gaining employment or moving into Higher Education. For many learners in the FLC, however, this was clearly not the case.

The third and fourth questions focused on the specifics of the learning culture of the FLC, inviting the interviewees to reflect on their learning journeys, what they felt about learning in the Centre and what (if any) difference coming to the Centre had made to them and their future plans and so aimed at obtaining a more holistic picture of the learners, their learning journeys, aims and aspirations. These questions revealed situational issues: the difficulties older people may face in coming to college to acquire IT skills which they think the young have already, the lack of flexibility in college mainstream IT programmes, the problems in acquiring IT skills in traditional classes and the difficulty of justifying a learning culture which is expensive to run because it accommodates when the learner wants to learn rather than following the restricted opening patterns of the college.

From the individual case studies, assertions were made regarding how the learners viewed their learning and how the tutors viewed their practice. These individual studies opened up questions concerning learner and tutor identities, social relations, tutor professionalism and other issues, including those related to the age of the learners, and what I began to see as the special nature of the learning which takes place in acquiring IT skills in the FLC. It will be argued

that the FLC does creates possibilities for personal change which is more far-reaching than simply acquiring IT skills but can be crucial in fostering employability and also enhancing people's lives. The title of the thesis eventually became *Lifelong Learning and the Learning Culture of a College Flexible Learning Centre.* The first part of the title, Lifelong Learning, relates to the first two research questions and the attempt to place the direction of travel of the Centre in the context of the policies for Scottish Further Education (FE) while the second part *the Learning Culture of a college Flexible Learning Centre* relates to what was revealed from the issues raised by the second two questions. As the distinctive nature of the teaching and the learning in the Centre gradually became clear from the data generated in the interviews, it was necessary in exploring this data to use the conceptual tools developed by James and Biesta (2007) in their exposition of a cultural theory of learning and of learning cultures. This cultural theory of learning and its application to the FLC is discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

The original questions then were like initial signposts to what needed to be learned to illuminate the Centre, its learners and tutors and its practice, sending me in a general direction but as I read and reflected more in the course of the research I found that other issues were emerging. These issue questions can be summarised as follows:

- What is the distinctive nature of the learning culture of the FLC and why does this way of learning IT skills seem to succeed particularly well for older learners?

- How far is it possible or desirable for FLCs to provide learning opportunities, how, when and where learners want?

- Is the role of a FLC tutor distinct from the role of a college lecturer?

Relevance and Significance of the Study

This study is relevant and significant in the wider lifelong learning landscape. One problem is that the learning in the FLC is seen by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HMIe) as supported learning, something in a different and possibly inferior category to mainstream classroom learning. This tends to marginalise the FLC and make staff feel undervalued, as does the fact that the type of learning taking place there can be criticised for not conforming to current theoretical definitions of desirable learning with their stress on learning as a social experience. Eighteen individuals each pursuing a different course within a learning space is hardly the type of education which we advocate to our staff in our teaching qualification courses with their stress on formal lessons predicated on delivery to a group with the objective of achieving common learning outcomes, yet the FLC type of learning clearly answers a need for some learners who cannot commit to classroom learning on the one hand or online learning at home alone on the other.

The story this study seeks to unpack is of a learning culture which has neither been researched nor evaluated. My aim was to give an opportunity for the voices of learners and tutors to be heard and so to illuminate the world of the flexible learning centre in the context of current policy debates. It emerged in the course of the research that the FLC attracted predominantly an older cohort of learners, precisely the people who are largely forgotten in policy initiatives at present because of the emphasis on improving the employability of the young.

My study may benefit learners in the FLC by illuminating what they gain from attending it and suggesting how their experience may be improved. At the same time it may help to provide an insight which illuminates constructs of lecturer/tutor identities and the learner identities in Scottish Further Education of those who are predominantly older learners. Finally it may encourage others to consider whether the pedagogy employed could be transferred to other areas and whether changing demographics may mean it could be considered as especially appropriate for older learners.

At College level, this will be the first doctoral research project carried out in the College by a practitioner and may help to encourage the beginnings of the development of a culture of research within the College.

Chapter 2: The Policy Context

A man in his own secret meditation

Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made

In art or politics

Yeats: *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*

<u>Introduction</u>

In this chapter I try to place the FLC in the context of the labyrinth of policies

which have shaped the Scottish college sector from the 1990s onwards.

Lifelong learning policy is traced from its first emergence as a European

strategy in the 1990s and the perceived importance of bridging the digital divide

and encouraging social inclusion is discussed. The FLC's emergence and the

convergence between its goals and the early goals of the Scottish University for

Industry (SUfI) are analysed.

Policy documents' stress on the perceived link between acquisition of skills and

the economic competitiveness of the country is explored critically and the

negative effects of an audit culture in FE and the difficulties of accommodating

the type of provision in the FLC to this audit culture is discussed. Social

inclusion, and in particular the existence of a digital divide which excludes the

poor and older people is also explored in the context of the FLC. This is linked

to the latest Skills Strategy for Scotland and its recent update. Because the

learner cohort in the FLC is predominantly older, policy attitudes and support

for older learners are examined critically. The chapter concludes by circling

back to the research questions and their attempt to evaluate why learners

came to the FLC and the contribution of the FLC with regard to employability.

Lifelong Learning Policies and the Flexible Learning Centre

The Flexible Learning Centre at Hollypark College had its genesis in the mid-

1990s when it was decided to set up a small unit where learners could enrol at

any time of the year to undertake non-certificated IT courses with tutor support.

This was at a period when personal computers were relatively new for many

people and the Internet had yet to become widespread in Britain. At this period

there was a new interest in lifelong learning although as far back as 1973 the

OECD had published eight principles of lifelong learning which included the

ideas that It should be possible and important to pursue any career in an

intermittent way and that degrees and certificates should not be looked upon as

an end result of an educational career but rather as steps and guides toward a

process of lifelong education and lifelong career and personal development

(OECD: 1973). There was also a proposal that on completion of compulsory

schooling each individual should be given a legal right to a period of

educational leave of absence without risking the loss of his job and social

security. As Elliot pointed out (1999: 28), no country put these principles into

practice and they remained an ideal, a blueprint for reform. Clearly lifelong

learning was also envisaged as something limited to those in work.

In 1972 in an UNESCO report entitled *Learning to Be: the world of education today and tomorrow*, lifelong education was seen as a continual process which resulted in creating

> the kind of complete man the need for whom is increasing with the continually more stringent constraints tearing the individual asunder. We should no longer assiduously acquire knowledge once and for all, but learn how to build up a continually evolving body of knowledge all through life – 'learn to be' (Fauré et al 1972: v-vi).

This idea of education leading to wholeness and growth of knowledge across the life-course was a much broader view than that which current discourses of lifelong learning convey. Fauré et al saw democracy as 'implying each man's right to realize his own potential and to share in the building of his own future' (Fauré et al 1972 v-vi).

Four years later, however, came what Grubb (2004: 2) sees as the start of the modern rhetoric concerning the supreme importance of skills in a speech by Callaghan in 1976 where he declared:

> the goals of our education are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both. . In today's world, higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for those without skill (cited in Grubb 2004: 2).

Contemporary conceptualisation of lifelong learning as a strategy, however, was according to Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007: 3) first fully articulated in the European Commission White Paper *Learning and Teaching: Towards the Learning Society* in 1995. This paper identified major challenges as

the impact of the information society, the impact of internationalisation (or globalisation as it is commonly referred to) and the impact of the scientific and technical world (cited in Morgan-Klein and Osborne 2007: 3).

Its suggested responses were to focus on a broad base of knowledge and building employability in the new knowledge or information society. A year later 1996 was designated Year of Lifelong Learning. In this year Fauré's 'learning to be' was, however, still one of the Four Pillars of Jacques Delors' *Report for UNESCO on education for the 21st Century* and the term 'education' was still being used in this context (Delors 1996). However, also in 1996 the OECD convened a meeting of education ministers under the banner of Lifelong Learning for All which referred to global competitiveness and changes in society although also recognising that lifelong learning was not confined to formal learning and acquisition of skills. In 1999 The UNESCO Task Force on Education for the 21st Century reiterated that

> … the Commission embraces one of the basic assumptions stated in the report *Learning to Be*: the aim of development is the complete fulfilment of man, in all the richness of his personality, the complexity of his forms of expression and his various commitments - as individual, member of a family and of a community, citizen and producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer (UNESCO Task force for Education in the 21st Century 1999).

Keep has identified an incremental process in the development of policies moving from the aspirational visions of lifelong education to a narrowing of focus and

> the gradual accretion of layer upon layer of policy statements and of a sequence of iterations and re-iterations of policy thinking over a 30-year period that is broadly akin to the process through which sedimentary rock is laid down. – it developed quite slowly and sometimes haltingly,

though with an underlying general trend that, at each successive stage, the claims being made for the economic (and more latterly social) role of skills were increased (Keep 2009: 2).

Field (2006: 11-15) has described this shift from lifelong education to lifelong learning and the stress on vocationalism as being promoted by

> such temples of human capital thinking as the Organisation for Human Capital and Development (OECD) and the European Commission , where lifelong learning is regarded primarily as a source of competitive advantage (2006: 17).

Field explains that during the 1980s and 1990s, the OECD had the goal of supporting its members, the world's wealthier nations, in

> 'encouraging macro-economic stabilisation, structural adjustment and the globalisation of production and distribution' while secondarily paying attention to the preservation of 'social cohesion' (Field 2006: 16).

Scottish policy papers in the 1990s reflect this climate of opinion clearly.

Opportunity Scotland (Scottish Office 1998) identified involving adults in lifelong learning as the nation's biggest challenge. To achieve this it intended to invest in the Scottish University for Industry, stimulate the growth of local learning centres and encourage colleges to develop ICT links. The stress was on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and on developing Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), a competence-based assessment framework. This paper also situated lifelong learning clearly in the discourse of competitiveness, stating:

> Lifelong learning is a key element of personal, business and national competitiveness. People who update their skills and learn new ones will get better jobs and achieve more success in their chosen field of work. Likewise employers gain when their workforce learns. Benefits for them include higher productivity, better quality products or service, a more

flexible and motivated workforce and a greater likelihood of good retention rates (Scottish Office 1998: 3.1).

At UK level, The University for Industry (Department for Education and Employment 1998) Prospectus spoke in terms of building a learning revolution among children, adults and organisations alike. Part of this revolution was to be achieved by harnessing the power of developments in IT, communications and broadcasting, and giving people the flexibility to choose how, when and where they learned with opportunities at work, at home, or in their communities.

This vision of a revolution in lifelong learning was promoted by governments not just because of the argument of economic competitiveness but also because of a recognition that there were those in society who were excluded because of poor qualifications or poverty who were likely to fall even further behind in the new digital age. There was a recognition that employment had changed, that society had also changed and a growing gap was developing between those who were part of this new 'learning society' and others who had lost out at school and did not participate in formal education afterwards. An apocalyptic view of the possible consequences of this was voiced by The British Committee of University Vice-Chancellors who declared (UK Presidency of the European Union Lifelong Learning Conference 1998: 5):

> As the economic need for a more highly educated and skilled workforce increases, the under-educated will fall even further behind. The under-educated will become disaffected and disenfranchised. Widespread alienation poses a threat to the stability of society – ignorance carries high costs.

Against this background, New Labour came to power in 1998 with a vision of

education which they declared in a Green Paper

> is about more than employment. The development of a culture of
> learning will help to build a united society, assist in the creation of
> personal independence and encourage our creativity and innovation
> (DfEE 1998: 10).

Two years later the College obtained ESF funding to construct a new

£1.5million building (the LITEhouse) to house the FLC and the College library.

The early objectives were extensive and included meeting the needs of small

businesses and local employers and improving the quality of learning and

providing a guidance environment for ESF and other beneficiaries, for new

learners and for people in work. In addition the FLC was to promote flexible

and on-line learning and training opportunities and to widen the range of

provision for SMEs and disadvantaged local communities, particularly in the

form of discounted access to learning packages and free internet access.

These objectives can be seen as mirroring those of the Scottish University for

Industry which was also established in 2000. Set up by the Scottish Executive,

Sufi aimed to focus on the needs of new learners from socially excluded areas

and on the training needs of small to medium sized companies. Within a year

the FLC was branded as a Scottish University for Industry learning centre,

committed to Sufi's pledge of learning when, where and how the learner

wanted.

This was against the background of a college sector in Scotland which had

seen incorporation of individual colleges which moved from the control of the

Scottish regional authorities to becoming independent self-governing

organisations. A direct result of incorporation was an expansion in Scottish

colleges' provision because incorporation transformed colleges from

organisations with common pay and conditions for staff, clearly differentiated

niche markets and little need to compete with each other, to individual

organisations driven by competition, with differing pay and conditions and in

many cases a drive to expand by competing for students. Green and Lucas,

(1999: 45), analysed the then government's motivation for incorporating

colleges as follows, and although the reference is to England, this analysis is

equally valid for Scotland:

> The driving concept behind the FEFC's model of incorporation was an
> expanding sector linked to improved 16-19 participation, improved
> retention rates and the promotion of more adult learning. The aim was
> to create a sector with a higher national profile, being more standardised
> so that it could be judged by national criteria for efficiency and
> effectiveness and operate at reduced unit costs.

Significantly in the six years after incorporation, student activity in Scottish

colleges rose by 50% (Scottish Office 1999). There were attempts to widen

participation by establishing outreach campuses in areas of social deprivation

and to bridge a perceived digital divide by setting up learning centres in

mainstream college campuses but also in community venues and in

workplaces. The use of the term 'learning centre' was also significant, marking

what Edwards (1997) saw as a discourse of the adult-as-learner with

responsibility for his own learning who packages or processes learning in

various forms rather than the adult-as-student who is part of an institution which

imparts the canon to him. Flexibility and lifelong learning, according to Nicoll (2006: 7) were

> promulgated as truths, as required responses to an increasing pace of change, the economic and social pressures of globalisation and uncertainty over the future.

Nicoll argues that both flexibility and lifelong learning are crisis narratives providing an imperative for policy action and certainly the tone of the policy documents is to create an idea of the need for urgent action. Flexibility is seen as the response necessary to cope with change and the idea that making learning more accessible will enable more learners to become employable by taking on the responsibility of being more flexible and upskilling or reskilling is implicit in the rationale of Sufi and the FLC alike.

Coffield (2008: 15) has expressed his disappointment that between 1998 and 2008 policy narrowed into the focus on skills for employability and the 'mantra' of 'economically viable skills' of the Leitch Report (Leitch 2006). Although Leitch's report applied specifically to England and Wales its Executive Summary echoes ideas which have been adopted in Scotland also with one of its underlying principles, a

> focus on economically valuable skills. Skill developments must provide real returns for individuals, employers and society. Wherever possible, skills should be portable to deliver mobility in the labour market for individuals and employers (Leitch 2006 Executive Summary).

Coffield has attacked Leitch and the whole concept of employability very forcefully stating:

> Skills for 'employability' have now been enthroned as the main focus and 'mission' of the sector and as the main means of meeting the ambitious targets set by Lord Leitch. Notice, the objective is not even 'skills for employment', but skills for that weasel word 'employability', which means learners joining the reserve army of labour, while constantly honing their skills in the hope of being called into work, when, where, and at what level of pay suits industry (Coffield 2008: 59).

Although Coffield and Keep were referring to England, a press release by Scotland's Colleges (2009) identified the Scottish sector's perceived role as focusing on employability skills, with the added boast that colleges were helping to drive the economic recovery. A college principals' spokesperson made the following statement:

> Scotland's colleges are exceptionally well equipped to provide skills and training to help thousands of people become more employable. Through the delivery of core skills, both educational and vocational, to meet the needs of national, regional and local job markets now and in future areas, colleges can help steer Scotland out of the recession and redevelop the economy (Scotland's Colleges 2009).

As Coffield noted in his criticism of the objective of English colleges, the colleges are not aiming to help people gain employment but to become 'more employable'.

This is possibly at first sight a departure from the original aims of the Scottish Executive's strategy on Lifelong Learning (Scottish Executive 2003) which set out a six year plan regarding lifelong learning. In his Introduction, the then Minister Ian Gray defined lifelong learning policy in Scotland thus:

Lifelong learning policy in Scotland is about personal fulfilment and enterprise; employability and adaptability; active citizenship and social inclusion (Scottish Executive 2003).

Interestingly 'personal fulfilment' comes first on the list here although it is coupled with enterprise which perhaps suggests that personal fulfillment is not so much about learning for its own sake but about making money. Biesta has claimed that the personal and the democratic dimensions of lifelong learning have become something seen as of lesser importance than the economic dimension (Biesta 2006). If some lifelong learning courses therefore are only of personal value, it can be argued that they should not be funded from collective resources. There is then a question mark over such learners as those who come to a series of courses in the FLC after they are retired or because they are unfit to look for work. These courses may foster their personal development and may have other benefits but from the perspective of the country's competitiveness they do not fulfil any productive function. This is despite the fact that their benefits for the individual and society may include promoting independence in older learners by enabling them to participate in the online economy and online access to government functions.

Economic Competitiveness and Social Inclusion

In the nine years since the FLC was set up in its current location, its role has shifted and evolved against a background of a changing political and educational landscape in Scotland. Its development has been influenced by the wider policy initiatives which influence the whole college sector and an

overview of these helps to place the FLC and its learners in context. According to Scottish Executive policy pronouncements, further education colleges should fulfil two general roles. On the one hand, they are seen as vital in helping the UK achieve economic competitiveness yet at the same time they are supposed to play a key role in social inclusion. Nicol Stephen identified these roles when he stated:

> We ask colleges to be at the forefront of preparing people for complex jobs in an increasingly competitive labour market. At the same time we ask colleges to reach deep into our most disadvantaged communities, bringing opportunities, encouragement and self-esteem to people who might never before have aspired to further education and training (Scottish Executive 2005a: 1).

The early objectives of the FLC echoed the social inclusion agenda set out here, and how far this has been achieved will be discussed later. The other role envisaged for colleges as key in improving economic competitiveness, by which government assumes that improving the skills of the population will lead to an economically more prosperous and successful Scotland in the global context, has been a constant refrain since Scottish devolution. Policy statements in documents such as *Learning for All* (Scottish Funding Councils 2005*), More Choices, More Chances* (Scottish Executive 2006c*) and Workforce Plus* (Scottish Executive 2006f) all claim lifelong learning fosters individual skills and contributes to the economic prosperity of the country. In 2006, a Review of Scotland's Colleges (Scottish Executive 2006f) reported that the colleges through increasing qualifications had a net economic benefit to Scotland of at least £1.3bn, representing an excellent return on investment. This monetary language applied to colleges has implications of an audit culture which will

monitor the investment and a growing culture of credentialism where any

learning which does not lead to accredited qualifications becomes something

which the individual may be expected to finance. Scott (2003) has commented

on what happens when an audit culture takes hold. He acknowledges that it is

important to evaluate policies and programmes, to learn from mistakes but sees

that in FE this kind of audit culture destroys trust and points out:

> Lost trust is difficult to regain. In further education, student 'units' are
> remorselessly and comprehensively audited. The clear implication is that
> colleges themselves cannot be trusted to get their sums right – or not to
> fiddle them (Scott 2003 in *The Guardian online*).

The emphasis on the measurable outcomes of qualifications also enables the

government to claim it is obtaining best value for the millions which it invests in

colleges. As Young has pointed out (2008: 126) governments are keen on

qualifications because this enables them to increase their control of education,

provide simple measurable criteria for allocating funds to institutions, make

local and regional led training and training organisations more accountable and

provide quantitative measures for the success of government policies.

The Review of Scotland's Colleges report (Scottish Executive 2006f) identified

colleges as a key factor in implementing the Executive's Framework for

Economic Development in Scotland (Scottish Executive 2004) whereby

increasing skills was seen as leading to increased productivity and the

increased competitiveness of Scotland's economy. The report quoted this

summary of the position:

> Better skills are the key to improving individual life chances, increasing the flexibility of the labour force and maintaining competitiveness. Scotland has to embrace the knowledge economy and the reality of continual learning if it is to compete in the global marketplace. (Scottish Executive 2006f: 6).

In colleges, flexible learning centres could be seen as at the forefront of this agenda for, as will be seen, their emphasis on IT skills is deemed essential for the modern worker in 'the knowledge economy' and they are well positioned to respond to the demand for flexibility, being available for learners to enrol whenever individuals decided to pursue their courses. The basic metaphor of skills as a 'key' used in this report, suggests a simple cause and effect relationship with skills acquisition having inevitable outcomes for the individual and the economy.

<u>Criticisms of the Skills Agenda</u>

Wolf, however, has expressed trenchant criticism of the skills argument. She pointed out (2003) that

> Mathematics and information technology skills are increasingly valuable in the labour market, but research at the Institute of Education shows that they are useful when they are embedded in specific knowledge and experience related to a job in a firm. They do not function as bolt-ons. People do not become valuable to employers via free-standing training sessions on a software package. No new employee, however good his or her maths, can possibly interpret and analyse data usefully in advance of time on the job.

She concludes that educational institutions cannot produce completely 'workplace-ready' employees any more than workplaces can take over education and examining. Boreham came to the same conclusion (Boreham

2004: 7) that the assumption that occupational competence is an individual attribute which can be learnt beforehand, the Association of Scottish Colleges (2008) 'work-ready skills' perhaps, and measured on an individual basis by SVQs, ignores the fact that 'performance is embedded in the collective activity of the workplace.' This raises the question of how employable the learners in the FLC are as they complete their various courses on spreadsheets or databases. Perhaps what the FLC is doing, however, is not so much producing 'workplace ready' people but fulfilling a more modest agenda of widening horizons for those who have dropped out of the labour market for one reason or another and enabling them to become confident in their use of IT.

Colleges, however, are seen as part of a progression process which leads learners to acquiring skills which enable them to advance to higher levels of qualifications through articulation to universities and hence to jobs which will situate Scotland in a leading position in the global market with increased productivity and profits. The economic assumptions underpinning this strategy, however, have been questioned by Brown et al (2008). Research they carried out with multinational companies called into question the then government's assumptions about the global economy and the global skills race described by the then Prime Minister in February 2008 (Brown et al 2008: 4) where the argument was that Britain needs to push harder for education for all to 'unlock the talents of all of the people'. According to Brown et al, Britain will find its graduates competing with lower paid but equally highly skilled graduates from India and China and this may lead to a low-waged, highly skilled economy in

Britain. The returns on knowledge will decline for many (Brown et al 2008: 18)

and the inequalities in society may become even more marked than they are

today. If this reading is correct, then increasing the skills of the population will

not in itself increase competitive advantage and the belief that colleges are key

players in realising the economic strategy underpinning this skills agenda rests

on very shaky foundations. This begs the question of what the FLC can

realistically achieve in focusing on employability and skills acquisition in

providing skills which may not lead to further qualifications and highly paid jobs.

Coffield (2000: 6) has also critiqued this skills growth model of a learning

society, pointing out that 'Workers can become enthusiastic and flexible lifelong

learners and yet remain powerless to influence the major decisions which

transform their lives'. He is sceptical of the belief that improving the labour

force's skills will be a critical determinant of economic competitiveness. He has

also questioned the idea of continual learning always leading to higher earnings

by examining the emergence of credentialism in the NHS where staff undertook

further qualifications to protect their current job position rather than to earn

more or become better at their jobs (Coffield 2000: 8). Coffield (2007a: 16) has

been scathing about the assumptions he sees as underlying current

educational policy and although he is talking about England, his comments

seem equally applicable to the Scottish college sector. He identifies what he

sees as three wrong assumptions: firstly that our future depends on our skills,

secondly that the employers should be put in charge in all matters concerning

vocational education and the skills strategy and thirdly that market competition

is needed to make providers efficient and responsive. He points out that

although these assumptions have been criticised for almost thirty years by such

writers as Karabel and Hasley (1977), Ball (1993), Barlett et al (2000), and Wolf

(2002), they still appear in policy documents as if 'they were eternal truths'.

The assumption that improving skills alone will increase competitiveness and

productivity he claims was contradicted in 2001 by the Treasury which saw

skills as only one of the five drivers of productivity

Crowther has challenged also the whole idea of current policies of raising skills

and sees current interpretations of lifelong learning, as

> …primarily a mode of social control that acts as a new disciplinary
> technology to make people more compliant and adaptable for work in
> the era of flexible capitalism. Lifelong learning diminishes the public
> sphere, undermines educational activity, introduces new mechanisms of
> self-surveillance and reinforces the view that failure to succeed is a
> personal responsibility. It is ultimately a 'deficit discourse' which locates
> the responsibility of economic and political failure at the level of the
> individual rather than at the level of systemic justice (Crowther 2004:
> 125).

What is expounded here is a vision of the individual policing himself in a sinister

process with its hidden agenda of

> …creating, malleable, disconnected, transient, disciplined workers and
> citizens (Crowther 2004: 127).

This critique of lifelong learning sees the former discourse of lifelong education

influenced by humanist ideology and advocating personal growth as now

marginal in the current lifelong learning field. Biesta (2006: 169) has explored

the shift from the concept of lifelong learning 'seen as a personal good and as an inherent aspect of democratic life' to something 'increasingly understood in terms of the formation of human capital and as an investment in economic development'. Biesta argues that

> …the shift towards a 'learning economy' has resulted in a much more individualistic understanding of lifelong learning and has transformed lifelong learning from a right into a duty. Not to be engaged in some form of learning is increasingly seen as a problem (Biesta 2006: 170).

Some of the FLC learners, it is true, saw their learning as a necessity to gain employment driven by their individual circumstances but for others employment was not the ultimate goal. Deeper needs related to identity were being addressed in some cases and having access to a series of courses available which can be achieved with relative ease seemed to bring its own psychological and practical benefits.

Current government skills and lifelong learning policies, however as Biesta (2006) and many others have pointed out, have been increasingly dominated by the economic imperative. This has, however, been challenged by some and, for example, NIACE's Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (2008) carries a strong warning by the Director of the Inquiry, Schuller, that we should avoid 'the simplistic notion that you drive up skills and economic performance just falls into place'. Ewart Keep urged the Inquiry to be modest in its claims for lifelong learning. He pointed out that structural forces have a greater impact on many of the goals of the skills policy, for example 22% of jobs in the economy

are low paid and 33% of all female workers are in low paid jobs and this cannot be cured by upskilling (Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning 2008: 3). In Europe the idea of upskilling leading to prosperity at an individual and national level was attacked by Forrester over ten years ago when she argued (Forrester 1999) that work-experience and retraining may often do nothing more than reinforce that there is no real role for the unemployed because if people are not a potential source of profit, they are of no value to a capitalist state with a shrinking labour market.

Social Justice, IT Skills and Demographics

Apart from the stress on globalisation and economic competitiveness, another important theme in government policy has been the social justice aspect of lifelong learning which has been stressed in policy strategies on poverty. One area where skills acquisition may seem desirable for a significant section of the population is that of ICT skills and The Scottish Executive's Digital Inclusion Strategy was introduced by Wendy Alexander with the declaration that the Scottish Executive was committed to achieving social justice in implementing this strategy (Scottish Executive 2001b: 1). A report which discussed this Strategy in 2006 (Scottish Executive 20006b: 12) stated that its aim was to 'increase the chances of sustained employment for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups – in order to lift them permanently out of poverty'. It claimed that nearly 75% of available jobs in 2001 required ICT skills and pointed out that ICT is the third basic skill. However, it quoted Department for

Education and Skills figures that while 29% of people receiving means-tested benefits lack basic literacy skills, a 'staggering' 79% lack practical ICT skills. The corollary therefore seemed to be that if these people were provided with ICT skills they would be lifted out of poverty. It is very much a deficit model which has been critiqued by Selwyn (2003) who has claimed that non-engagement with technology may be a deliberate choice in some cases. Yet evidence of post codes of FLC learners has revealed that at the time of the study 47% of learners came from the 15% of most deprived post codes in Scotland and so it would appear that a large proportion of its learners were from the groups which most concerned the government. These learners by coming to the FLC were making a clear attempt to engage with technology and for some of them this was for the first time. However, for Edwards and Boreham (2003: 408) the European Commission's view of a learning society reveals the 'ultimate fallacy of believing that education and training can cure ills that are rooted in the structure of society and the workings of the economy'.

The report on the Digital Inclusion Strategy (Scottish Executive 2006b) also acknowledges that demographics mean there is an ageing population, a large proportion of which is in danger of becoming digitally excluded, although the development of IT skills in the older age groups can result in increased self confidence, social contact and mental stimulation. Here the driver in providing opportunities for the older age groups to improve IT skills may therefore not be employability, but as a 75-year-old learner told me, the stimulation of 'the grey

stuff between the ears' and the opportunity to keep active, to meet other people

and to postpone mental and physical decline. The high cost to the economy

that may result from failing to invest in lifelong learning for older age groups is

not something which seems to have been stressed recently by the government,

nor has funding been directed specifically towards the older learner. It is true

that there is no age restriction on Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) and it

could be argued therefore that this funding includes the older learners but there

seems at present to be a move away from focusing on older learners. In 2000,

however, research carried out by the Cabinet Office Performance and

Innovation Unit had identified a problem in that the numbers of people in the

age group between 50 and state pension age who were not working had

doubled since 1979. This was estimated to cost the economy £16 billion a year

in lost GDP and the public purse £3–5 billion in extra benefits and lost taxes.

Another aspect this research identified was that:

> People who leave work early often experience growing disillusionment
> and exclusion. They are not in general replacing paid work with
> community activities such as volunteering. (Cabinet Office Performance
> and Innovation Unit 2000: 5).

This report made 75 recommendations about a strategic approach to this

problem including reforming benefits for older workers, discouraging early

retirement and creating ways of encouraging older workers back into work or

into voluntary work. One conclusion about older learners is particularly

interesting. It quoted an OECD conclusion that putting less-educated older

workers in large-scale, classroom-based training programmes had been

particularly unsuccessful and concluded that ways should be found of structuring learning for older learners, particularly in relation to IT skills (Cabinet Office 2005: 85). This finding is something which will be discussed later in the context of the FLC learning cohort.

Age Concern (2004) carried out research about the implementation of this report which found that the Government had moved towards meeting some of the recommendations but in the field of lifelong learning:

> The Government's performance in promoting opportunities for older people to gain new skills is patchy. In the summer of 2003 the Government launched the Skills White Paper, which made no mention of the ageing workforce or of age discrimination in the provision of training (Age Concern 2004: 11).

Since Age Concern's report, the main focus in Scotland seems to have been consistently on younger learners and references to the needs of older learners in more recent policy documents tend towards general statements such as the following (Scottish Government 2007b: 21):

> As our demographic profile changes and Scotland's population ages, older people also need to be able to return to learning to enhance their skills. These individuals will have different expectations and needs from young people leaving school. In particular, the greater demand for part-time and accelerated study options will present challenges to providers.

It is perhaps encouraging that the needs of older people are acknowledged here. There is a potential debate, however, about how these needs can be addressed and I will argue that in the context of IT skills, the FLC has a particularly important contribution to make. In the course of researching the FLC it has emerged that the FLC attracts predominantly an older cohort of

learners with an average age of 48 in the 2 years studied, although this is not a

conscious aim, and the evidence would seem to suggest that in the particular

case of IT skills which may be necessary not just for employment but to

function in an increasingly digitally orientated society, the challenge of how to

enhance these skills may be being met in this learning culture. In essence,

however, the general position regarding the learning of older people has not

changed much from how Withnall described the situation back in 2000:

> The present UK government has acknowledged the need to 'break down
> barriers' to older people playing a full part in its vision of a learning
> society but to date its proposals for development and the packages of
> support available to adult learners suggest that people who are post-
> work are not genuinely part of the vision (Withnall: 2000: 290).

Withnall carried out research in 2002 which identified the following outcomes

from older people's learning: keeping the brain active, intellectual stimulation

pleasure and enjoyment, self-satisfaction and acquiring new knowledge. These

benefits may have little to do with competing globally although it could be

argued that they may have economic benefits as enhancing the quality of life

for older people decreases the likelihood of their making demands on the NHS

and social services. These findings were echoed by Age (2007: 2), a European

lobbying organization for older people, which stated in its submission for the

European Year of Opportunities for All:

> The concept of lifelong learning stresses that learning and education are
> related to life as a whole – not just to work – and that learning
> throughout life is a continuum that should run from cradle to grave. This
> learning does not need to be linked to the attainment of formal
> qualifications.

Age's statement also highlighted that in 2007 the number of learners of 45 plus

remained far below the target of 12.5% set by European Member States and

that:

> Adult learning for older people has not yet gained the priority it deserves
> in terms of visibility, policy prioritization or resources (Age 2007: 3).

The European Commission (2006: 3) had made very similar observations

stating that most education and training systems were 'still largely focused on

the education and training of young people and limited progress has been

made in changing systems to mirror the need for learning throughout the

lifespan'. Again the Learning Lives project (Biesta 2008) comes to the

conclusion that older adults (54+) do not seem to be catered for at all in the

present skills drive.

This is certainly the case within Scotland's colleges where the stress on the

economic benefits of education and responding to government policies on , for

example Commonwealth Apprenticeships, reflects government concern with

the need to address the needs of those young people who leave school without

qualifications. Interestingly the participation rate of students at Scottish

colleges has been falling in the past few years which means that fewer

people participate, but they are taking longer courses in terms of learning

hours (Scottish Funding Council 2008). The trend is therefore against

expanding the sort of short courses which the FLC offers to individuals

and increasing those longer courses which can bring in more Student

Units of Measurement (SUMs).

The Scottish Skills Strategy: Employability and Learning

The Scottish Government's *Skills for Scotland, A Lifelong Skills Strategy* (2007b) is the key policy skills document which impacts on colleges today. It appeared at the very beginning of the new Scottish National Party administration and was described as:

> …a framework to show how all of the constituent parts of our education and learning systems can contribute to giving Scotland a skills base that is world class. As well as aiming to promote equal access to and participation in, skills and learning for all, we will aim to recognise people's different needs, situations and goals and remove the barriers that limit what people can do and can be (Scottish Government 2007 b: Equality Statement). .

The title of the document is interesting, because it is no longer a Lifelong Learning Strategy but a Lifelong Skills Strategy and it is perhaps significant that not only has there been a move from lifelong education to lifelong learning but now a further move in the emphasis on skills. It claims to have a distinctively Scottish interpretation of skills and Keep (2009: 31) has praised it for 'generating a search for interventions that tackle the demand for, and usage of skill, as well as its enhanced supply' in contrast to the concentration in England on what he sees as stockpiling skills and qualifications to keep up with other countries (Keep 2009: 4).

However, the Strategy appears to employ what Williams (2008) describes as an instrumental model also used in English policy documents, resulting in what Williams argues is a narrow concept of inclusion and a degraded view of

education (Williams 2008: 151). The idea of a financial return from learning is stressed with the confident claim that:

> Investing in our people's skills, ensuring that skills contribute as much as possible to sustainable economic growth, is central to unlocking our potential (Skills for Scotland 2007b: 2).

Biesta has described this concept of investing in human capital as 'learning for earning' (Biesta 2006: 172) and the familiar financial language of return on capital and of 'unlocking' suggests as Williams points out (Williams 2008: 153) the omnipresent idea in these policy texts that acquiring the skills means that the individual's and possibly the country's latent potential will be freed. Williams' argument (Williams 2008: 158), that the instrumental model assumes an economy dependent upon individuals possessing high level skills to sustain their own financial prosperity and national economic competitiveness with the consequent social exclusion of those individuals who do not possess such skills, is implicit in this policy document. For Biesta (2007: 169) this human capital model when applied to lifelong learning encapsulates a shift from earlier models of lifelong learning which related to its personal and democratic functions.

In this document there is the claim that:

> The skills that individuals learn must also be the skills that employers want. To do this our providers must continue to build on and develop the links they have with employers, ensuring that employers are properly engaged in the development and design of learning and ensuring that what individuals learn is relevant to the jobs they will do (Scottish Government 2007b: 23).

It defines employability skills as

> …skills, behaviours, attitudes and personal attributes that are necessary for an individual to seek, gain and sustain employment and function effectively in the workplace and are transferable to a variety of contexts. Employability skills prepare individuals for work rather than for a specific occupation (Scottish Government 2007b: 52).

The individual described here has been characterised by Skeggs (2004: 176) as 'The risk-taking, enterprising, mobile, reflexive, individualist self, or the 'subject of value', deemed necessary by global economic rhetoric which requires access to the right resources to produce itself. This construct, however, seems to reveal an underlying assumption that learning's sole purpose is to provide a skilled workforce and the onus is on individuals who have a duty to learn skills which the employers want. The Skills Strategy states:

> We will stop distinguishing between Earners and Learners. Working and learning are often seen as two distinct and separate entities, with the learning to be completed before the working can start. In practice, we never stop learning and we learn a vast amount in the workplace, often informally (Scottish Government 2007b: 29).

Concentrating on the workplace and the role of employers in the 'development and design of learning' may, however, downgrade the role of FE colleges in designing programmes. The employers may have technical expertise and context specific knowledge but there is no guarantee that they will have an understanding of learning or teaching. According to Lucas (2004: 48) there is evidence that employer-led bodies were unsuccessful in England in vocational education as employers did not have the time to devote to them and they

ended dominated by officials. Coffield (2007a: 17) has argued that giving

employers the leading role in developing new policy for the sector is 'one long

story of spurned advances'. Young (2008: 139) has also pointed out that the

reality is that in many sectors employers are reluctant to take a role in

developing vocational qualifications and frequently lack the necessary

expertise. In the context of the FLC, many individuals are sent by employers to

improve their qualifications but the employers are not a united body as in a

discrete vocational area but themselves disparate small organisations and it

would be difficult to see how they could actually have a role in designing their

employees' learning. Sometimes, however, it is true that employers' needs are

clear, for example they seem to like what they see as proof of IT skills in the

shape of the ECDL certificates from the British Computing Society and the FLC

can respond accordingly.

The Skills Strategy has of course to be seen against the European context of

the European Union's Lisbon agreement aimed at more competitiveness

through raising skill levels, an aspiration which the Scottish Government

endorses wholeheartedly. Behind the Scottish Skills Strategy lies the

European Union's e-Skills Strategy which stresses that traditional notions of

literacy need to embrace a complete set of eSkills and points out that lack of

these skills exacerbates social and educational disadvantages, inhibits lifelong

learning and up-skilling while also preventing people from using e-commerce

and e-government applications and participating fully in the information society

(Commission of the European Communities 2007: 6). European funding part-funded the FLC's current building in 2000 and its IT-focused role fits in well with the stress on the importance of eSkills in lifelong learning and in helping learners to become part of what the Commission describes as the information society.

As a Learndirect centre then, the FLC is part of a government strategy to counter social exclusion and increase economic activity by increasing IT skills which reflects European as well as UK policy. Recently Learndirect Scotland has become part of a new body called Skills Development Scotland. The four partners in this body claim to have 'a shared vision (Skills Development Scotland 2008). This vision, they claim,

> will be a catalyst for real and positive change in Scotland's skills performance. We will help individuals to realise their full potential, we will help employers be more successful through skills development and we will work in meaningful partnership to enhance Scotland's sustainable economic development.

As part of this drive, Learndirect makes the same aspirational declaration it has made since its foundation (Learndirect 2008):

> The Scottish Government would like everyone to be able to carry on learning right throughout their life – whether it's to get a job, improve existing skills or just to find out about something because it's interesting. At Learndirect Scotland we help to do this by showing people, like you, how, where and when you can learn in the way that suits you best. We encourage people from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who, for whatever reason, have lost their confidence in education to find a way back into learning. We can help you develop your knowledge and abilities or extend your work-related skills. Or maybe you just want to learn something because you've always wanted to – perhaps it could become a new hobby. Whatever you want to learn – we can help.

Interestingly this still includes the idea of learning for its own sake – 'you just want to learn something because you've always wanted to' – which government policies tend to ignore or to which they pay a token tribute in passing. The audience who is being addressed are those who are disadvantaged or who have lost confidence and there is an assumption that only these people will be responding to the advert. They are positioned as 'other' from mainstream learners, as 'people like you' who are different from conventional learners, lost souls who have to 'find a way back into learning',

Biesta sees these government attempts to foster employability and social inclusion as necessitating personal change which a focus on short courses is unlikely to achieve (Biesta 2008). The Skills Strategy, however, looks beyond short courses and lays great stress on the SCQF, imagining learners, often those in work, as moving through a chain of educational opportunities up to university level. Significantly, there are 18 references to the SCQF in the Skills Strategy, and most are concerned with using the framework to incorporate all work based learning. One example is the declaration that

> It is important then to be able to recognize and value the skills acquired at work, whether it is informal 'on the job' learning or more formal. The SCQF can help to achieve this. This needs to become increasingly widely used as a tool to recognise employer (sic) learning (Scottish Government 2007b).

The underlying rationale behind this may be what Young (2008: 129) identified as a belief that a qualifications framework would enable those with skills in the workplace but without qualifications to become qualified without further study.

He pointed out, however, that it is difficult to find significant numbers of people in the UK with skills and knowledge that they have acquired informally in the workplace who are formally unqualified.

The skills listed in this strategy document also include a new category of essential skills which are not all directly certifiable. These skills include personal and learning skills that enable individuals to become effective lifelong learners, and employability skills alongside the five core skills. The document lists the skills which employers are said to demand including effective time management; planning and organising; effective oral and written communication skills; the ability to solve problems; being able to undertake tasks or make submissions at short notice; the ability to work with others to achieve common goals; the ability to learn and to continue learning; the ability to take responsibility for professional development; and having the skills needed to manage, or be managed by, others (which draws on many of the other skills in this list) (Scottish Government 2007b: 12). The list ends with the phrase 'and so on' suggesting even more skills could be added to this already very broad and general list which could lend itself to any approach to curricula. For some employers the skills they might expect their employees to exhibit in being managed – docility, obedience, conformity to organisational goals – might not be in the interests of the lifelong learner constructed here. Keep (1999: 10) has argued that many of the attributes being labelled as skills

> …appear to be personality traits or attitudes which may only be partially amenable to change and enhancement through traditional VET.

He further points out that in some cases the so-called skills are related to class background and therefore not something which can be passed on through education. As learners, often in late middle age come to the FLC with their identities influenced by aspects of class, gender, social and cultural capital and learning and work trajectories it seems at first almost presumptuous to suggest that the changes which may be needed to result in becoming the employee envisaged can happen simply by attending the Centre.

In 2007, the same year as the Skills Strategy, the Scottish Funding Council issued a circular, stating:

> Enhancing the employability of people wishing to enter the workforce, and of people already in the workforce is a key priority in the Council's corporate plan for 2006-9. This reflects the wider Scottish, UK and European public policy context, which stresses the economic and social benefits of continuously developing the skills of the population (Scottish Funding Council 2007: 1).

Skills are at the centre of the thinking reflected in this circular. Its 'quality enhancement' agenda focuses on four themes: strengthening employer engagement in the learning process, enterprise, strategic approaches to employability by developing toolkits and performance measures tracking 'the routes learners take into and out of college' (Scottish Funding Council 2007: 3). Thus the immediate direction of colleges has been driven by this agenda and all sections of the College have been held accountable on how far they were fostering 'employability' in their learners. The FLC was no exception to this although the stories of the learners reveal that for some their attendance may be for quite other reasons. In celebrating successful learners in 2008,

however, the emphasis switched to those who gained work as a measure of success.

<u>Individualisation and the Individual Learning Account</u>

The ILA is the one key government initiative which has been embraced in the FLC and is now an important source of income for the FLC. It is often used to pay most of the costs of the European Computer Driving Licence, a qualification with an externally assessed examination which is recognised by many employers as guaranteeing a certain level of IT skills. The ILA, however, has been criticised on various levels. Field (2006b) criticised its bureaucracy, although it could be argued in its defence that the first scheme with 'lurid tales of bogus courses and fictional learners' (Field 2006b: 36), led to fraud on a fairly large scale in England by so-called learning providers and current bureaucracy is an understandable reaction against this. The Scottish Executive, however, congratulated itself on having introduced the ILA as one of a set of measures which have supposedly made their lifelong learning vision a reality. It is specifically described as intended 'to enable individuals to take control of and direct their own learning' (The Scottish Executive 2006b: 2). According to the Executive (The Scottish Executive 2006c), 22,000 people booked or undertook learning with these accounts with 90% on low incomes. This figure is very surprising as it appears to contradict most research on lifelong learning such as studies cited by Courtney (1992) and McGivney (1992), which demonstrate that those who avail themselves of learning

opportunities are most frequently those who have benefited from education in the past and are less likely to be on low incomes. It also conflicts with an evaluation by Learndirect Scotland which showed that the majority of those who undertook courses were already well qualified prior to undertaking their courses and as the report points out, 'appears to bear out the received wisdom that 'learning begets learning' ' (Scottish Government 2007a: 4.42). It is not clear whether the uptake of the ILAs in the FLC corroborates the Executive's claims of reaching mainly the underprivileged either, as some of those attending are women without an independent income, but who may be from a prosperous background where the husband/partner is a relatively high earner.

What is clear is that the uptake of ILAs is growing and has been attracting substantial numbers of new learners to the FLC. However, there is a fundamental difficulty with the ILA funding, as with funding for tackling Adult Literacy and Numeracy, in that it has no permanency, unlike funding for schools, so that if government decided to withdraw it because, for example of the current economic downturn, the FLC would find its income suddenly slashed and a possible drop in its learner numbers which in turn would lead to questions about its own viability.

Conclusion

The FLC's foundation was a direct result of a response to the lifelong learning and skills policy agendas and it has evolved in the context of a stress on skills

and employability. It seems to succeed in attracting significant numbers of

learners from deprived areas who are targeted by government policy and is

heavily dependent on the government-funded Individual Learning Accounts.

The policy documents, however, largely ignore the older learners who make up

the majority of those who come to the FLC. IT skills assume a central

importance in some policy approaches and the FLC is well placed to offer

these. There is a need to look beyond a narrow skills based agenda at the

wider beneficial effects which the learners identify as a result of their

attendance and to interpret employability in a wider sense.

Chapter 3: Learner and Tutor Identities

The horse that comes from the road,

The rider, the birds that range

From cloud to tumbling cloud,

Minute by minute they change;

Yeats: *Easter 1916*

<u>Introduction</u>

The focus of this chapter is on learner and tutor identities in a world of constant

change. Literature on the benefits of education is explored with the argument

that there are other beneficial outcomes for learners in the FLC than simply

employability skills.

To look at identity, the conceptual tools of field and habitus are defined within

the context of the FLC learning culture and different understandings of identity

within the life-course explored. It is argued that the FLC approach may be

particularly effective in accommodating transitions without additional support

mechanisms and that learning in the FLC may have both transformatory and

maintaining functions.

Finally concepts of learner and tutor identity are examined against the

background of current discourses of professionalism in Scotland's colleges.

The differences between the identities of tutors and lecturers and learners and

students are explored and possible evaluations of the teaching and learning in the FLC discussed.

Self-optimising Practices

The stress on the need for individuals to undertake change is clear from the policy documents and for many who come to the FLC the start is taking up the Individual Learning Account. The Individual Learning Account therefore is the success story in financial terms of the FLC, bringing growing numbers of learners through its doors, learners who have to make a small contribution to their own learning and who may only learn on approved courses. Boreham (2004), however, has critiqued the ILA approach as promoting individual values in support of the then Government's commitment to free enterprise and its lionisation of entrepreneurs. He points out that government help in this case was designed to reinforce self help with individuals then being held responsible if they failed to learn, progress and enter employment. Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007: 19) are also suspicious of these lifelong learning policies which 'offer a prescriptive individualism to participate in learning across the life-course and self-optimising or self-managing practices are emphasised' while Field (2006a: 55) has explored the new adult education which

> …allows participants to work actively on their identities and renegotiate their place in a complex world.

Field discusses the emphasis on the individual's control or taking charge of his/her own body which has led to the rise in gym memberships, beauty therapy and self-help literature. In the fitness industry, he points out:

45

> Tuition and support, then, are designed and delivered with the aim of appearing to learners to be both flexible and personalised, but also to present quite a different experience from that conventionally associated with the relations between 'teacher' and 'taught' (Field 2006b: 57).

There is an interesting parallel here with the FLC where, like the gym, individuals enrol as individuals and the relationship with the tutor can become a personal one, quite distinct from the relationship with a conventional class lecturer. Again, like the gym, the FLC relies on customer loyalty and word of mouth recommendation to build up its learner base and learners meet with the tutor to work out their personalised programme. Like non-formal learning, the FLC learning is a kind of active consumption in which individuals work on their IT skills and perhaps also attempt to create the kind of identity which will be favoured by employers. If government policy has a sub-text that learning is aimed at changing selves then, as Chappell et al (2003: 3) argue, lifelong learning is aiming not only to make people 'more skilled or more rounded citizens' but to construct identities that can 'perform better'. This can mean that the policy emphasis is on 'changing our *working* identities' (Morgan-Klein and Osborne 2007: 17, emphasis in original) although this also 'spills over into informal learning, including activities designed to optimise the self'. Perhaps choosing to attend the FLC is also a kind of self-optimisation, enabling some individuals to attempt to create a new identity which enables them to perform better both in work and society in the digitally dominated world of the twenty first century.

Benefits of Education

The emphasis on personal change is also at the heart of the professed aims of Learndirect Scotland which the FLC officially espouses as a branded learning centre. The advertising proclaims:

> Every day, people in Scotland are changing their lives through learning.
> Learning something new can help you to
> - earn more money
> - get a better job
> - do something you really enjoy.
>
> It can be a way to gain new confidence and discover talents you never knew you had. It can be a way to meet new people and have a bit of fun. If you feel you're in a rut it could help you escape (Learndirect Scotland 2008).

Unpacking this reveals in the first two bullet points a simplistic echo of the familiar assumption that learning leads to monetary returns while the third point seems to be more about personal fulfilment. The other benefits advocated – creation of confidence and discovering hidden talents - suggests the idea of creating a new identity or realising a potential, while the social aspects of education are suggested in the idea of meeting new people and finally the transformatory idea of escaping from a stagnant life position. The idea of learning as fun is interesting as it is singularly absent in the economic policy texts with their presentation of lifelong learning as something quasi- compulsory where the 'reality of continual learning' (Scottish Executive 2006f: 6) is not a choice for personal fulfilment but a necessity resulting in a flexible workforce who can contribute to the economic effectiveness of Scotland. Thus Learndirect seems to allude to some of the rewards or benefits which lifelong learning can supposedly bring to the individual.

Whether learning actually changes lives is a question which has been the subject of research at a national level. The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, which was established in 1999 by what is now the Department of Education and Skills, has published work by Schuller et al (2004) which professes to take a wider view to cover the interaction between learning and people's physical and psychological well-being, the way learning impacts on family life and communication between generations and the effect on people's ability and motivation to take part in civic and community life. If these benefits can be proved to be accrued by learners, there is clearly an argument that government is securing a return from investing in education. Schuller et al's concept of identity capital provides a way into understanding what may be happening at a deeper level for learners. For Schuller identity capital refers to intangible assets (Schuller et al 2004: 20), the capacity of the individual that defines his or her outlook and self-image. This includes specific personality characteristics such as ego strength, self-esteem or internal locus of control but Schuller recognises that many of its components are socially shaped and not inherent personality traits. As Morgan-Klein and Osborne have pointed out (2007: 16) identity capital represents a resource that individuals can continually draw on when engaging in learning and Schuller stresses that identities are embodied in social relations. To understand the FLC learners, therefore, it makes sense to explore what previous identity capital they bring with them as learners and the social relations which may have helped to shape their learner identities. For Schuller education can be transformatory, and

speaking to the tutors, narratives of transformation form a central part of their concept of the impact of the FLC on learner identities yet as he points out, education can also play an important role in enabling people simply 'to cope with the multifarious stresses of daily life as well as continuous and discontinuous social change' (Schuller et al 2002: v).

Well-being and the Flexible Learning Centre

The concept of well-being, mentioned earlier in the context of Schuller's work, and the effect of adult education on well-being is something which has only very recently emerged in public policy. The Government Office for Science (2008: 10) defined well-being as a:

> A dynamic state in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others and contribute to their community. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society.

Field (2009: 9) in discussing this definition added that well-being

> …also, critically involves the resilience needed to deal with hard times as and when they occur.

Field's paper concludes with thirteen key messages (Field 2009: 36-40) for policy-makers and others concerned with adult learning and well-being. Three of these messages seem particularly relevant to what has been emerging from my study. The first is that well-being is of growing importance and that adult education has already been shown to make a small but significant, measurable positive contribution to well-being. There may therefore be a case to be made for promoting this aspect of the FLC. The second is that adult learning is likely

to be particularly effective in enhancing the well-being of our most vulnerable

citizens and included in that category are older women and men. This raises

the question of the apparent ageism of current funding policies for Further

Education. Thirdly is the message that a well–being perspective draws

attention to the role of anxiety and stress in adult learning environments when

rigid and universal application of assessment regimes takes place and again

this opens the way to discuss the value of the FLC alternative approach. If it

can be shown that attending the Centre has a positive effect on well-being, it

follows that the learners who attend will have gained something which makes

them more employable than simply their proficiency in IT skills.

The Cultural Theory of Learning

Research between 2001 and 2005 carried out in the Transforming Cultures in

Further Education project has focused on the FE learner in a variety of learning

sites and seen through the lens of a variety of learning cultures in colleges. For

James and Biesta (2007) or Hodkinson et al (2005b) learning is something that

happens in and through social practices. The theory of learning cultures which

underpins the TLRP project suggests that a learning culture is 'a particular way

to understand a learning site as a practice constituted by the actions,

dispositions and interpretations of the participants' (James and Biesta 2007:

23). The FLC is a distinct learning site and if James and Biesta's definition is

accepted, the learning which individuals undertake there, is 'an inseparable

part of social practice, closely related to what may be termed the culture of the

place of learning' (Hodkinson and James 2003). Here James and Biesta identify a central question: what forms and ways of learning are made possible within a particular learning culture and what forms of learning are made difficult or sometimes even impossible (James and Biesta 2007: 24)? Looking at the Flexible Learning Centre, at a very superficial level the learning involves the acquisition of mainly IT skills by self-directed learning with tutor support and of necessity excludes any other approach. However, the learning may also go beyond fostering skills and involve a fundamental change in the learners' relationships to their families and to the technological world of the 21st Century by enabling them to overcome technophobia and open up new possibilities. It may help to create new identities for those whose identities have been limited to the gendered ones of wife and mother or for those whose identities as workers have been destroyed by illness, accident or redundancy. Simply leaving the house and talking to other people and coming to the FLC may in itself be emancipatory for some learners.

To understand learning cultures James and Biesta use Bourdieu's conceptual tools of field and habitus. They aim to understand how individuals learn through their participation in learning cultures and conceptualise learning cultures as constructed and reconstructed through the forces of one or more fields (James and Biesta 2007: 28). Grenfell et al (1998) explain that education itself is a field with subfields of primary, secondary, further and higher education. Thus the FLC is located within the field of FE in Scotland but is also

within the field of Learndirect Scotland's branded learning centres. Then again

the FLC is located within the College itself and is affected by the organisational

culture of the College. These fields are related to social and economic

pressures which manifest themselves in such ways as the government

insistence on skills in its economic policy agenda and the constant interrogation

of numbers and costs to meet the demands of the Scottish Funding Council.

One year the FLC is driven to accommodate an influx of individual learners

through a resurrected ILA scheme, another year it may be forced to divert its

tutors to trying to market and deliver courses, if it can compete with private

training organisations, to SMEs because the College has been given funding to

encourage knowledge transfer.

Individuals' habitus, 'a battery of durable, transposable dispositions to all

aspects of life that are often subconscious or tacit' (James and Biesta 2007: 34)

develops from our social position within the field. These dispositions develop

through life and for James and Biesta:

> Learning can be seen as a process, through which a person's
> dispositions are confirmed, developed, challenged or changed (James
> and Biesta 2007: 35).

Habitus in this cultural theory of learning 'expresses the sense in which the

individual is social'. Thus, listening to the learners relating their experiences of

school, revealed that for several who left school early, their relationships with

the teachers and in some cases their fellow pupils had broken down and school

learning had become impossible. Dispositions to learning which had been

positive in the more socially integrated and caring world of the primary school, were transformed into negative dispositions resulting from a fear of teachers and fellow pupils with consequent rejection of the world of the school. In one case this resulted in a self-exclusion from the school because the pupil had become the victim of bullies and could not survive in the social structure of the school.

The concepts of field and habitus, according to Grenfell (Grenfell and James 1998: 87) are

> …mutually constituted for particular, practical purposes. Habitus replaces intentions with past histories, contexts and ideational structures in relation to the field.

Using this approach, a holistic view of the learners has to be taken to understand what learning means to them. Hodkinson found that using Bourdieu helped him to interpret data about young people's career choices because

> …it enabled us to see the field as more than either a set of structures or a set of rules. The practices of the different players in the fields and their relations to each other and the structures of the field contributed to the constitution of that field (Grenfell and James: 99).

Grenfell and James explain that:

> In some cases thinking in terms of *habitus* accentuates the sense of individual disposition in a research area and *field* allows for a mapping of ongoing organizational and consequential ideational forces at play (Grenfell and James 1998: 157).

Bourdieu's own description of his concept of habitus is of

> …a system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings (Bourdieu 1990: 59).

Those who are seen as employable clearly are seen as having certain dispositions and it appeared that those who came to the FLC shared certain dispositions which affected the way they acted and interacted in this learning culture. Using Bourdieu's approach meant that the use of the personal histories of the learners was essential to understand their current dispositions to learning and the structural forces which had affected them. If the concept of habitus is accepted it is clear that employability, therefore, was unlikely to be something which could be acquired by attending a college course but if habitus were to be altered in some way by the experience of attending the Centre there could perhaps be some effect.

The interviewees had all been conditioned by their exposure to a now historic Scottish educational system broadly based at secondary level on punishment and the installation of fear. For some this had resulted in wounding learning experiences which led to their leaving school early or having difficulty in participating in mainstream classes in later life. Some of the learners, however, had flourished in this system and perhaps it is not surprising that these were from a middle class background, and in Bourdieu's terms were better able to play the game and position themselves to fulfil the expectations of the teachers. Their middle class habituses could be said to have structured their school

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experiences positively yet this advantage disappeared when they came in later life to learn IT skills in the FLC. What was really significant was that all the learners, no matter what their earlier dispositions to education in general were, had, with one exception, been conditioned by the fact that they had grown up in a world where information technology did not have the dominant role it has today. This resulted in their perception of the young as having superior skills and insights in using information technology. All the older learners seemed to think that they were in an inferior position to the young and seemed tacitly to acknowledge that they did not have the pre-existing cultural capital to learn this skill, which is considered so essential today, easily. The conclusion is, not that the Centre can bestow employability on learners but that it in some way fosters what Bourdieu sees as a key element of habitus 'this power of adaptation' which in Bourdieu's view means that habitus 'constantly performs an adaptation to the outside world' (Bourdieu 1993: 88). For some learners it was about an adaptation from the world of the home where they had not taken part in adult discourse, for others it was about an adaptation from narrow employment practices to being open to other types of employment and for others it was a kind of transitional adaptation from work to future work.

Coming to the Centre seemed for most of the learners interviewed to strengthen this power and have a discernible effect not just in the restricted area of IT skills but more generally where confidence and self-esteem were concerned. One example of this effect concerned a gendered aspect of

habitus in the female interviewees. It became clear from the interviews that in the use of the computer in the home, women were initially positioned in a kind of subordinate position to their husbands or partners. This subordinate positioning applied to both middle and working class women where the computer seemed to be the possession of the husband. This parallels the situation which has been observed by Walker (1996) and others where men exercise power in monopolising television remote controls in the home and reflects the way stereotypical notions of men's innate superiority in the use of technology can be perpetuated. For the women who gained IT skills in the Centre, however, control of the computer could be challenged and their status with their children changed so that they, and not just their husbands, could understand and help with computing problems. In one case the woman gained a new independence which enabled her to speak about computer-related matters in company where before she would have been silent and disempowered.

To answer the research questions

- What is the relevance of employability and acquisition of skills to learners in the FLC?

- What is the relevance of employability and acquisition of skills to staff in the FLC ?

- How do FLC tutors view their practice?

- How do FLC learners view their learning and how does it relate to the rest of their lives?

the interviews explored how the learners' dispositions to learning had evolved before coming to the FLC and how they had or had not been affected by the experience of coming there. Learning as discussed in the literature, often means longer periods of learning, such as degree courses, while the FLC provides what one tutor describes as 'short bursts of learning'. The relationships between the tutors and the learners, however, often seemed quite intense with the learners confiding personal problems and issues to the tutors and this tended to confirm the central significance of the tutor in learning which, among others, James and Biesta (2007) and Coffield et al (2007b) have highlighted. It also was a very noticeable aspect of this particular learning culture that the tutors built up personal relationships with the learners and sometimes these relationships overlapped into other aspects of their lives beyond the FLC. There was a real sense that coming to the FLC and undertaking learning was a positive benefit in the eyes of some of the learners and this resonates with Schuller et al's general conclusion about the benefits of education:

> …the sustaining effect of education is pervasive, operates at many different levels and is critical to the lives of countless individuals and communities (Schuller et al 2002: iii).

Bourdieu, Identities and Transformations

Individuals' lives, however, clearly do not consist of learning episodes in a vacuum and Bourdieu's concepts of three types of capital: social, economic

and cultural capital have been increasingly built on in recent educational

theories to understand how and why people learn. The meaning of economic

capital as wealth is self-evident, while social capital can be seen as a network

of lasting social relations and cultural capital as the product of education.

Grenfell and James (1998: 21) explain that Bourdieu's cultural capital is in three

distinct forms

> …connected to individuals in their general educated character- actions,
> dispositions, learning etc; connected to objects – books, qualifications,
> machines, dictionaries etc; and connected to institutions – places of
> learning, universities, libraries etc

The argument is that people do not enter education with equal cultural capital

and it is true that the learners interviewed who left school at the earliest

possible opportunity, all of whom were from working class backgrounds, lacked

all three forms of cultural capital. Despite this, however, they had elected to

learn in the FLC and left it with a new form of cultural capital which for some of

them took the form of certificates and for others was a new disposition to

learning.

Recently there has been an increasing emphasis on social capital theory and a

concentration on biography and narrative in understanding learners' learning.

This has underpinned the Learning Lives Project which has also looked at

learners through the lens of Bourdieu's thinking. The findings of this project

were summarised and identity explained in this way:

> Using Bourdieu, we understand identity as the dispositions people have
> towards themselves. Identity is embodied, not just cognitive, and is

partly tacit. If and when identity changes, learning is an inherent part of that change process. Learning can contribute to and facilitate identity modification, but can also work to consolidate existing identities (Biesta 2008b).

Chappell et al theorise education as a vehicle for self-change and we can see this as part of the societal stress on optimisation which continually refers to realising potential. Chapell considers that

> …the various educational and learning programmes are best seen as technologies for constructing particular kinds of people and subjects (Chappell et al 2003: 10).

In this use of the term technologies, Chapell refers to Foucault who defined technologies of the self as forms of knowledge and strategies that permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality (Foucault 1988: 18). James and Biesta (2007: 86) discuss how, for example, the learning culture of a nursery nurse course could construct 'the right person for the job' who would be selfless, patient and self-controlled and willing to accept a low status, poorly paid job. The FLC is in theory supposed to construct people who will be employable and present with all the requirements employers claim to want in their employees.

Chappell raises the question of what identities are presupposed in certain pedagogical practices as this will clearly affect whatever transformation may take place. In the FLC it is presupposed that the learners will be adult learners,

capable of working quietly on their own but able to know when they should ask for help. They should not monopolise the tutors but in the words of one tutor have the 'grace' to wait for help if necessary. The tutors decide which learners should be singled out for awards and base their decisions on their own tacit criteria.

This mainly older learner, therefore, experiences in the FLC a type of pedagogy which presupposes learners who defer to the tutors' expertise, who are patient and quiet but who can make decisions with tutor support about when and how often they will attend. The locus of control is in some ways internal as if they choose not to attend, no one will be following this up to criticise or punish them (although reception staff may phone to find if there is a problem) but by working in the FLC, they place themselves under the surveillance of the omniscient tutor who has the power to select them for reward or in extreme cases if they do not fit in to the implicit rules of the learning culture, ask them to leave. (An example of the type of learner whose identity was not acceptable within the FLC was a learner referred by the local Jobcentre who continually made noises which were the source of complaint from other learners.)

Like many other FE teaching staff, the FLC tutors will relate narratives of transformation to illustrate what they consider gives them the most job satisfaction. They have set up a FLC annual Celebration of Learning which celebrates changed lives and this raises interesting questions about how the

tutors intervene to facilitate such changes and what this reveals about their

dispositions and assumptions concerning the self. By implication also this

Celebration, where the tutor reads a narrative about each awardee to an

audience of learners and their significant others, holds out to other learners the

possibility of transformation and reaffirms the values of the FLC. This reflects

Chappell et al's deconstruction of identity:

> Identity is dynamic and always in process. It defines self through
> ontological narratives of student and teacher identity that exist –
> narratives that provide different models of different types of behaviour
> and that themselves change over time (Chappell et al 2003: 52).

Tutor and Learner Identities

I would argue that tutor and learner identity are different concepts from student

and teacher identity with both the tutors and learners making clear distinctions

between their concepts of teacher/tutor and student/learner. Indeed the FLC

learners are viewed as distinct within the College itself. Edwards has identified

the twin discourses of adult as learner and adult as student. A student he sees

as part of an institution with a sense of belonging which provides grounds for

affirming a particular identity (Edwards 1997: 129). Knowledge is transmitted in

such an institution by experts to the students and the student has a bounded

sense of identity. Learners, on the other hand, may learn in more flexible ways

with the focus shifting from being members of an institution to learners

> who are given greater opportunity to negotiate their own ways through
> the range of learning opportunities open to them, invest their own
> meanings within the learning process and negotiate the relationship
> between learning and other activities (Edwards 1997: 130).

Adults, as Edwards suggests quoting Shah, 'are all kaleidoscope people, our shape changing constantly in accordance with how we are positioned and position ourselves' (Edwards 1997: 130). Coming to the FLC may effect a change in that shape for learners which may be more dramatic in some than others. This concept of a self which is continually in flux, is echoed in Gergen and Kaye's view of the self as relational, as a form of language game, shifting according to the relationship in which one is engaged (cited in Chappell et al 2003: 21). It is possible therefore that the self revealed in the particular relationship with the FLC tutors where interaction is one-to-one within a space occupied by a disparate group of individual learners, will be substantially different from the self which may be revealed in the context of a traditional class in a classroom following a traditional course and also in the self conveyed in the narratives of the interviews.

Pathways, Trajectories and Transitions

There are or course, other definitions of identity in current educational writings. Wenger has defined identity as '*a learned experience of agency* in the context of social structures' (2005: 22, original emphasis). He goes on to speak of the multimembership characteristic of identity with an individual defining himself according to his participation or non-participation in many communities of practice:

> Individual identities form through participation in these systems, which is experienced as a *trajectory* in and out of communities over time. Trajectory as the term is used here does not connote a simple linear

path, especially in the context of multimembership. A trajectory can be very convoluted, with returns and loops. With respect to a community, trajectories are sometimes inbound, sometimes outbound, and sometimes simply peripheral. But through all these phases and changing contexts, the use of the term is meant to suggest a continuity of the person produced as an experience of identity over time—through memories, through narratives, and through social expectations that you are still the same person. Trajectories of identity place any moment of participation in the context of a personal history, which includes where we come from and where we think we are going (Wenger 2005: 22).

The FLC may exhibit some aspects of Wenger's community of practice as some learners are encouraged by existing learners to attend and may learn from them what to expect and how to undertake learning there. However, for others it is a place where they are to an extent isolated and one at least had no interaction at all with existing learners.

Pallas, quoted by Ecclestone (2007: 3) differentiates between pathways which are described as 'well-travelled sequences of transitions that are shaped by cultural and structural forces' and trajectories, defining a trajectory as 'an attribute of an individual, whereas a pathway is an attribute of a social system.' The individual nature of a trajectory and the concept of identity trajectories as convoluted does not fit with the government model of lifelong learning as a progression through an interlinked education system (Scottish Government 2007b). The apparent ease of engaging with the FLC, however, accommodates less linear learning trajectories and there is an argument that this manifestation of lifelong learning cannot be envisaged as a chain for many of its learners but as something like a metro system with lines branching out in different directions, circling back to hubs and offering different places to get off

or on. For one learner, for example, the FLC was somewhere she accessed at two different points in her life-course separated by ten years. FLC learning could in this model be seen as a destination on a branch line where many of the learners have no interest in going to anywhere else further up the line or on the main system. However, there is always the possibility for them of switching to a more mainstream line or returning to the original destination again and again. One individual's arrival at the FLC may be after a truncated school education followed by a total exit from the system while another may have travelled to the Higher Education destinations which involve a longer journey but may have chosen to turn back and seek out this much lower entry point to the system. The metaphor of a journey may not be a journey upwards to obtain ever higher qualifications but could also be seen as referring to the journey by which identities constantly form and change in a world of increasing uncertainties and insecurities.

In the past, identity to a great extent was shaped by work or by gendered roles such as housewife and for one group of women interviewees, who had been in the home for several years, the housewife identity could still be said to be applicable. Field (2006: 18) has argued, however, that the transformation of work in modern society means that 'work is losing some of its central role in determining one's identity'. People live longer and may have longer periods out of work than in it. Identities may shift as life patterns shift and the old stabilities of society disintegrate. As Field (2006: 19) puts it, 'All of us face constant

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discontinuities in our life-course'. If the life-course itself is now fragmented as occupations become less stable and predictable and life events like marriage either no longer occur (1 in 4 households with dependent children was headed by a lone parent in 2008 compared to 8% in 1971 according to the Economic and Social Research Council 2008) or occur more than once within individual lives, learning is likely also to be something which may not conform to the traditional linear pattern. This is where flexible learning makes sense. Learndirect's concept of just in time learning, learning when the learner wants to learn, rather than learning dictated by an annual pattern of formal classes with the costly investment of new colleges lying empty for 10 weeks of the year, is at the moment only realisable in most colleges in somewhere like the FLC

For Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000: 595) 'Learning is tightly bound up with matters of identity and situation and cannot be extracted from them'. They stress the importance of economic, social and cultural capital in learning careers and in looking at young people's dispositions to learning found that transformations in learning careers were often linked with critical turning points in which learners had to confront for the first time some harsh realities. As already indicated, most of the Flexible Learning Centre learners interviewed were not young learners but certainly were facing the harshest of realities: unexpected redundancies, loss of employment because of illness or accident, disintegration of a marriage, the onset of a serious illness. Such critical turning points can mean that learning has an important role, in West's words (West

1996: 8) when the 'business of getting through the day, at home or work collapses or becomes unacceptable', in stopping lives fragmenting and in maintaining psychological health. He points out that feminist writers have suggested that

> …educational participation, for many women, may be an expression of a learned adaptiveness over time and a capacity to adjust to uncertainty and changing demands without psychologically fragmenting… Women have needed to cope with multiple shifting identities and to keep different parts of life and self together (West 1996: 115).

Women represent the majority of FLC learners and it is clear that for some coming to the FLC represents a way of coping with fundamental change. West sees participating in education as 'primarily concerned with managing change and creating space to compose a new life from the fragments of the old' (West: 25/26). Although West is discussing what could be seen as the more profound change of entering Higher Education (HE) with a commitment which may involve major changes of lifestyle and consequent fragmentation of identities, it can be argued that many FLC learners are also engaged in attempting to compose new lives and identities. Thus a housewife may be attempting to re-enter the world of work as a newly divorced woman; a woman who has worked for many years in a large organisation may attempt to redefine herself as a self-employed person or a mother may be attempting to enter the world of work in a different job role from her pre-child job. If this is so, then supporting learners in this process may be a more important role for the FLC than simply supplying the opportunity to acquire the skills which government policy seems to see as the primary driver for participation in FE.

However, Ecclestone (2007: 4) has problematised the whole idea of an individual as a subject which is transformed by education and requires support through a series of challenging transitions. She defines identity as the ways 'in which the self is represented and understood in dynamic, multi-dimensional and evolving ways'. Drawing on feminist literature including Quinn she sums up the feminist argument thus:

> A feminist perspective therefore undermines assumptions that 'becoming somebody' involves a unified subject capable of being transformed: a subject is not an 'entity' or thing, or a relation between mind (interior) and body (exterior). Instead, it must be understood as a series of flows, energies and movements and capacities, a series of fragments or segments capable of being linked together in ways other than those that congeal it into an identity (Grosz, quoted by Quinn, 2006, 4). From this standpoint, 'we are always lost in transition, not just in the sense of moving from one task or context to another, but as a condition of our subjectivity' (Quinn, 2006, cited in Ecclestone, 2007).

If life is an endless series of transitions then transitions become a natural state and Ecclestone is sceptical about what she sees as a preoccupation with

> …identity shifts and threats to identity, which lead to a view of transitions as risky, difficult and threatening to one's very sense of self (Ecclestone 2007: 11).

This view of transitions in turn leads to the idea that learners need support during transitions but Ecclestone questions a curriculum and pedagogy of the self which 'erodes educational goals and practices in favour of being supported and managed through a seamless, endless set of comfortable transitions' (Ecclestone 2007: 11). Ecclestone has extended her argument (Ecclestone et al 2009: 10) by stressing the importance of connecting the

> …pathologising of transition in policy, professional and academic concerns to a broader cultural preoccupation with emotional and psychological aspects of life and learning.

This, she argues can lead to a blurring of 'the spheres of public and private thought and action' which some learners may separate to maintain different identities. Quoting Quinn, she speaks of the fluid nature of transitions and the 'multiple identities involved in navigating them' (Ecclestone et al 2009: 6) along with the need for institutions to look at flexiblity in enrolment and funding and the ability to of learners to move in and out of the system.

In a sense all the learners in the FLC could be said to be in transition, even those in work, for they are adopting the identity of a learner, sometimes for the first time in years, which is only one aspect of the many other identities which define their lives. However, unlike other groups in the College such as 16-19 year old learners, who attend courses designed just for them as discrete groups with support in the shape of specifically employed support workers, the FLC learners are there as individuals rather than reified as a particular type of learner or 'problem'. For them undertaking the transition to becoming a FLC learner is often far from comfortable yet they do not receive any special support apart from that of the tutors who see themselves as nurturing the learners. The learners are not surrounded by the apparatus of support which Ecclestone describes as

> …counselling and mentoring, the elicitation of biographical narratives, the smoothing of learning cultures and relationships and the insertion of requirements to develop 'learning to learn' skills or self-awareness (Ecclestone 2007: 11).

I find Ecclestone's argument about the potential dangers of these types of approaches to transitions compelling when applied to aspects of some mainstream college courses but I would argue that this is one area where the FLC is different. There is always a risk in coming into the learning culture of the FLC where goals are individualised and there is stimulus and challenge but it is the stimulus and challenge of reaching an individual rather than a group goal and dealing as an indivdiual with the transition from whatever place and situation they left temporarily to come to the FLC. For several of the learners in fact the transition is not seen as the threat to the self which Ecclestone identifies in some contemporary approaches to transitions but as a positive opportunity to build a new self with a sense of agency which had been eroded or had never truly existed elsewhere in their life-courses.

Listening to the learners' stories provides a strong reinforcement of the idea of identity as something which is always becoming, multi-faceted. The question which arises, however, is whether there can be in the FLC what Biesta (2008: 6) characterises as 'significant changes in self-identity for many of those people whose life chances the government is hoping to improve' . The Learning Lives Project's conclusions are that this is unlikely to happen through short courses and so by extension, the government's investment in short courses via ILAs is not well founded. While the limited possibility of a short course to lead to a real change in self-identity may seem self-evident, there is a distinction between short traditional courses and the learning which takes place in the FLC which

may range from a kind of total immersion by some individuals day after day over a short period of time, to a long-term commitment by others with a whole range of other learning patterns in between. Some of the narratives which emerged, did seem to indicate a perception of either the maintaining function which education can create suggested by Schuller (2002) or the transformatory function which enables individuals to construct a new learning identity and perhaps gain a new sense of agency in their lives.

Exploring learner identities in the FLC through the medium of narrative has been a key aim of the research. It has taken a snapshot of 15 learners' learning journeys captured at a time of undertaking or having just undertaken learning within the FLC and invited the learners to reflect on their dispositions to and experience of learning across their life-courses. Learner identities, however, are not something which can be studied in isolation. The other key elements of the learning culture are the tutors and the tutors' dispositions and their working practices have been examined in the second part of the research. In the case of the tutors, this has been explored against a background of discourses of professionalism in FE.

Managerialism and the Flexible Learning Centre
However, these positive aspects of attending the FLC in terms of effects on identity and possibly by corollary employability, do not fit well with an inspection regime which uses the language of business in its performance criteria and

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relies on producing SUMs as the justification for courses. It is perhaps also

significant that the general view among College senior management would be

that the successful college is one which not only breaks even but also produces

a surplus financially. This is likely to be the holy grail of the members of college

boards of management, people characterised as having "extensive business

experience and key economic skills" (Scottish Executive 2005a: 3).

This concept of the college as a business is part of a managerialist discourse

which has been explored by among others, Robson (1998), Avis (1999) and

Sachs (2001). Avis notes that teachers are no longer autonomous

professionals in their classrooms but are subject to increased surveillance of

their work in a culture of self-assessment regimes. Sachs, writes about schools

but what she says can apply equally to colleges, identifying two competing

discourses of democratic and managerialist professionalism (Sachs 2000: 149).

According to Sachs, citing Rees (2000: 151):

> Managerialist discourses make two distinct claims: that efficient
> management can solve any problem; and that practices which are
> appropriate for the conduct of private sector enterprises can also be
> applied to the public sector.

This managerialist culture permeates colleges with an increasing demand for

measurable targets and constant self-evaluation by teams supposedly leading

to measurable improvements in learning and teaching. Definitions of learning

in colleges, however, are still conceived in terms of what happens on formal

courses with retention and achievement acting as performance indicators for

measuring the success of the courses and programmes. Crucially of course,

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these performance indicators are linked to funding. Flexible learning centres

unfortunately do not produce the standard product and it is difficult to manage

and inspect them for quality assurance because the underlying assumptions

about learning and modes of delivery are so different from mainstream. The

dangerous conclusion, dangerous that is for the FLC, which may be reached is

that if the criteria which underlie managerialist professionalism cannot be

applied, then the FLC form of learning may not be worth funding and the tutors

cannot be considered professional. Perhaps it could then be argued that the

tutors should be designated support workers although the proliferation of posts

for learning support workers is something which Robson (2004) thinks could

undermine the lecturing profession. This view ranks teaching and those who

are involved with the learner in a hierarchical way with those who are paid most

being those who are entered into the ranks of the professionals by virtue of

their status in delivering lessons in ways which would be familiar to the

traditional world of the academy while all others occupy an inferior position

financially and in terms of status.

Conclusion

Employability is high on the agenda of colleges but the FLC's learners and

tutors work towards this indirectly in ways which are fundamentally different

from that of the main College. Learner identities are different from that of

students who follow, for example, an HND programme over two years as a

discrete full time group and the tutors' identities are different from staff who

teach mainstream groups. Employability and acquisition of skills may not be the primary outcome of attendance at the FLC with learners gaining other benefits, such as an increased power of adaptation, which strengthen their identity capital and may act in a transformatory or maintaining way. How far the tutors' work is valued depends on the wider views of learning and teaching which underpin the quality framework and the managerialist approach to colleges which is driven by Scottish Funding Council requirements. The professional status of tutors is problematic in the current inspection regime and current practices of initial teacher training but the value of what they do could perhaps be measured differently.

Chapter 4: Design of the Study

Leonato: Are these things spoken, or do I but dream?

Don John: Sir, they are spoken and these things are true.

Shakespeare: *Much Ado About Nothing.* Act 1V Scene 1, 65-66.

Introduction

This chapter explains the epistemological and methodological approach which underpins the research. The rationale for use of a case study is discussed. The positivist approach is seen as unsuitable and narrative inquiry is put forward as the most effective way to understand the learners' dispositions towards learning. An explanation is given why a standard ethnographical approach was not possible and why observations did not yield really meaningful data. The interview techniques used are placed in context and the holistic approach to data analysis which was adopted is explained.

The Scope of the Study

Flexible learning centres are sited in many of Scotland's colleges, with most of them incorporated within the Learndirect Scotland network of learning centres, but they vary in opening hours, the times of year they are open, the levels and qualifications of staff employed and the numbers and types of courses offered. Cohorts of learners vary also but the mode of assisted self-directed learning is likely to be similar in each centre.

I decided to concentrate on one centre, partly because of the practicalities of researching part-time while working as a full-time manager, but more importantly because I believe that, if the cultural theory of learning is accepted, the individual learning culture is worth studying in its own right. There could potentially also be difficulty in obtaining what might be quite sensitive data about enrolments in other colleges and to manage the kind of in-depth analysis I wanted to attempt. As a researcher working alone it was also clearly not realistic for me to attempt a multiple case study analysis. I therefore decided to carry out a case study of the FLC in Hollypark College and saw what I was doing as reflecting Bassey's definition of a case study as a study of a singularity conducted in depth (Bassey 1999).

This decision to use a case study approach was based on the potential of the case study for providing what Flyvbjerg (2001: 73) has described in defending the case study against its critics as:

> Concrete, context-dependent knowledge (which) is therefore more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals.

Flyvbjerg argues that this context-dependent knowledge is central to the social sciences and is 'at the very heart of expert activity' (2001: 71). Experts, whom he defines in Dreyfus and Dreyfus's terms (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986) are those at the highest of five levels of learning where they are

> …characterized by a flowing, effortless performance, unhindered by analytical deliberations (Flyvbjerg 2001: 21).

To arrive at this level, they have acquired a 'basis of several thousand concrete cases in their level of experience' (Flyvbjerg 2001: 71). A case study can therefore be seen as contributing to knowledge which experts and others may utilise. Stake (2006) builds on Flyvbjerg's argument with a very similar conclusion when he states:

> Competent performers, experts and virtuosos need case-based contextual understanding to add to their own direct and vicarious experience (2006: 90).

My case-study, therefore may provide knowledge which others may find of relevance aiming for, as Stake puts it,

> not veridical representation so much as stimulation of further reflection, optimising readers' opportunity to learn (Stake 1995: 42).

This study therefore is very different from the type of case study envisaged by Yin (1993) where an auditor could repeat the procedures and arrive at the same results. This positivist position presupposes a fixed set of data waiting to be discovered which is researched in a scientific way where meaning is not influenced in any way by the researcher. In the case of the FLC, the perceptions and ideas of those who work and learn there are not scientifically verifiable facts, but are expressed in stories which the interviewees have to tell at a particular moment in their life-course in a particular situation to a particular person. The idea of an auditor conducting the interviews, and indeed the connotations of a number-crunching accountant being equated with a researcher and eliciting identical responses from the interviewees is clearly not tenable. I also part company with Yin when he advocates that a case study

must start with a hypothesis. For me, the research started with questions and

the field work yielded possible answers which came to be analysed against the

background of other research in the field of FE.

A powerful refutation of the positivist approach in social science research has

been made by Flyvbjerg in his development of the concept of phronesis.

He states that the goal of phronetic research is

> …to produce input to the ongoing social dialogue and praxis in a society
> rather than to generate ultimate unequivocally verified knowledge
> (Flyvbjerg 2001: 139).

This kind of research works, according to Flyvbjerg (2006: 136) because:

> The minutiae, practices and concrete cases which lie at the heart of
> phronetic research, are seen in their proper contexts, both the small,
> local context which gives phenomena their immediate meaning and the
> larger, international global context in which phenomena can be
> appreciated for their general and conceptual significance.

The case study enabled me to explore the small local context of the FLC as a

concrete case which yielded rich data against the wider policy background.

I am aware, however, of the general criticisms which can be made of case

study research. The strengths and limitations of case studies have been

critically analysed by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001). The main limitations

they identify are as follows: too much data is generated for easy analysis; they

are expensive if undertaken on a large scale; the complexity is difficult to

represent simply; they do not lend themselves to numerical representation;

they are not generalisable in the conventional sense and there are doubts

about their objectivity (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2001: 8-11).

Hodkinson and Hodkinson admit there is bound to be too much data and I

attempted to handle the data by including mini-case studies and analysing each

so that the individual stories would not be lost. At the same time, I am aware

that the richness of the data was difficult to address in the limited space of a

thesis. My case study was only small scale so the question of excessive cost

did not arise. I did find it difficult to represent the complexity and trying to write

the conclusion was the part of the thesis which caused most problems.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001: 10) found that the fourth limitation about the

difficulty of numerical representation could be answered by demonstrating how

> …attempts to break down data into numerical categories undermined the
> essential richness of the interrelationships we were interested in. In this
> respect, as others, the very strengths of case study research… are the
> cause of this inability to count effectively.

The charge of case studies not being generalisable in the normal sense is

certainly true. However, I would agree with Stake that what the case study

researcher is doing is making assertions rather than generalisations and that

the reader can then construct his/her own generalisations. Stake puts it like

this:

> Because the reader knows the situation to which the assertions might
> apply, the responsibility of making generalizations should be more the
> reader's than the writer's (Stake 2006: 90).

I am very aware of the question of objectivity, especially when as a practitioner

I am directly involved in decisions about the Centre and as a researcher in all

the decisions about the sample, the conduct of the interviews and the analysis.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001: 11) admit that complete objectivity is not

possible because

> …a key determinant of the quality of a piece of case study research is the quality of the insights and thinking brought to bear by the particular researcher. No matter how rigorous we strive to be, this means that the research is not, and cannot be, completely objective, nor can we easily make transparent *all* the judgements we have made (emphasis in original). Like all good researchers, we try to present adequate evidence, from the data, to support the stories we tell, but a certain amount has to be taken on trust.

I realise that this weakens case study research in the eyes of those who carry out analysis of large representative samples and follow a positivist approach but as Flyvbjerg argues (2001: 86):

> Case researchers practising phronesis demur from the role of omniscient narrator and summariser in favour of gradually allowing the case narrative to unfold from the diverse, complex and sometimes conflicting stories that people, documents and other evidence tells them.

Allowing the narrative to unfold presumes a different kind of objectivity and I would hope that this has been achieved in this study. Researching learning and learners' views of their own learning, together with tutors' views of what is happening in a particular learning culture produced readings and ultimately assertions based on certain facts but also on much more subjective data where my own background and views inevitably influenced the outcome. From this research has come what James (2008) refers to as indicative possibilities, where I believe this small scale investigation may have wider implications. I also agree with Bloomer and James (2001: 7) that case study has a 'particular potential for practitioner-researchers'.

Finally, I would like to quote Stake's forceful and convincing conclusion about the potential merits of the case study.

> Because it is an exercise in such depth, the (case) study is an opportunity to see what others have not yet seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretive powers, and to make even by its integrity alone, an advocacy for those things we cherish (Stake 1995: 136).

This is something I will return to in my concluding chapter.

Stakeholders

The stakeholders in the research are firstly Hollypark Strategic Management Team who make overall decisions about courses and curriculum. As they have approved that the College is paying two thirds of the cost of the doctorate course, they have an interest that the research is completed and can be seen to be of use to the organisation. Already the study has proved of practical use in providing details about who the learners are and why they attend which had not previously been gathered. Preliminary findings were submitted at the time of the HMIe review in 2008 to illustrate the role that the FLC was playing in widening access and the nature of the learning which was taking place.

The second group of stakeholders are the learners, tutors and FLC support staff as they may be affected by the outcome of the study which provides evidence which can be used in future decision making about the role of the FLC. In addition as the budget holder for the FLC I am a key stakeholder myself and I brought to the research a reflective awareness of my own commitment to the FLC, while at the same time knowing that I was opening its workings up to scrutiny.

Sampling

I carried out semi-structured interviews with 15 learners, 2 tutors and one member of support staff. The second member of support staff was intermittently present during the research and finally left the College in September 2008 and has since been replaced.

My sampling started from the premise that the FLC does not have a homogeneous group of learners and I wanted to include a range of learners. I had been aware from general observation over the past five years that the learners appeared to have varied backgrounds and I hoped to obtain a sample which would reflect this mix. This follows the maximal variation approach outlined by Flick (1998) and recommended by Maykut and Morehouse (2000) which is particularly effective where the sample size is small. I intended from the beginning to transcribe all interviews and I knew that the size of the sample would have to be small if this were to be feasible.

I took for my sample a group of learners who had received awards within the FLC as Learners of the Year in 2006/2007 as it seemed probable that they would be most likely to be willing to take part and they represented a group of learners for whom the pedagogical approach had apparently been successful. In this selection I was trying to find the "best" people as Stake interprets the term:

> 'Best' (quotation marks in original) usually means those that best help us understand the case whether typical or not (Stake 1995: 56).

As I was trying to find out what difference coming to the Centre made, I was more likely to discover this by speaking to those who were considered, or considered themselves, to have gained something from attending the Centre. They represented learners who had had the maximum engagement with the Centre and had agreed to be celebrated publically as outstanding. They also had closer relationships with the tutors than some learners as they had chosen to reveal their personal histories to the tutors and to allow these to be shared at the Award Ceremony (albeit in a selective way).

I had already looked at the data about the Centre drawn from College databases, as mentioned earlier, which revealed that the learners in the Centre were predominantly older, predominantly female and a significant percentage came from areas of multiple deprivation. I was able to establish immediately by looking at the enrolment data of the awardees that the average age of this group reflected the age profile of Centre learners and that more females than males gained awards. An analysis of their postcodes revealed that 7 of the 15 came from areas of deprivation which again mirrored the general composition of the cohort of learners in the Centre.

Speaking to the tutors about how they arrived at their choice of Learners of the Year revealed a variety of criteria which was reflected in the variety of learning biographies of the sample. Having this variety meant that I could gain an insight into the different reasons why these learners attended the Centre and

how the tutors came to the conclusion that these diverse people all could be

designated specially successful learners revealed interesting aspects of the

tutors' dispositions to teaching and learning.

The first tutor, Jim had two main criteria for his selection of these particular

learners. Firstly he chose learners who have

> …something else, something big going on that they have sort of being
> dealing with and it's taken just a little bit extra to stick with the course
> and to keep attending and to keep up the standard of the work and I
> think that's a great thing for someone to be able to do that.

This first group will always be a highly subjective choice as Jim would only

know about those who were willing to bring their problems to him and reveal

aspects of their identities and learning lives which other learners might keep to

themselves. Ecclestone (2009: 10) in fact, writing in the context of formalised

targets and assessments in transitions, has criticised the tendency to

> …jeopardise the separation that some children, young people and adults
> use to maintain different identities. In doing so, they blur lines between
> formal education and private life.

It could be argued that in a sense, these are the more dependent learners who

want to talk about their home life who are likely to be celebrated and a learner

who quietly goes through his/her course without disclosing personal problems

to the tutor will slip beneath the radar. Because of the background of these

learners, improving 'employability' was likely to be only part of the much more

complex outcomes which they were likely to identify as resulting from coming to

the Centre. From the point of view of conducting the study, this group of

learners provided rich data on what the Centre could offer in the way of helping to achieve what Schuller et al have identified as two benefits of education: transforming or maintaining lives in the face of adversity (Schuller et al 2002). Nine learners from the sample could be seen as in this category.

The second group, Jim chose, however, seemed to be rewarded for diligence and specifically going beyond the minimum needed to pass ECDL, which he saw as primarily a qualification which contributes to employability. Two of the award winning learners interviewed seemed to have been selected on these grounds. Jim therefore excluded learners from being eligible for awards who simply came in for what Jim described as short bursts of learning, sometimes job related, on other courses which are not assessed by marks unless they had personal issues he knew about.

Yusef stated that he chose awardees for

> …their ambition, how we changed their personal efficacy, how we
> changed their attitude towards the subject and how they have
> progressed and moved on.

Like Jim, he celebrated achievement but he did not define what he meant by ambition and most of those interviewed had quite limited ambitions. All, however, could have been said to have progressed and there was clear evidence of changes of attitude in most of the sample. He also mentioned, however, giving awards to those who are slow, to encourage them to do better and this could be seen in the case of one learner. Again there is a mix of

criteria here, and the result seems to be a group of learners with very different learning trajectories and achievements. Neither tutor mentioned gaining employment as one of his criteria yet one of the learners thought she had received an award because she had got a job and other learners did not know why they had been selected. The overall impression really was that the selection of awardees was very subjective founded on an underlying philosophy of recognising transformation and change of efficacy in their lives for some and diligence and achievement in others, although this could not be applied to the oldest learner whose recognition seemed to be something almost equivalent to a lifetime achievement award for long attendance at the Centre. This very subjectivity in selection, however, aided the case study as it resulted in a group of interviewees whose stories illustrated the range of people who could benefit from and who contributed to this learning culture.

The overall number of learners approached originally was 19, consisting of 7 male and 12 female learners. It proved more difficult to interview the male learners as some were working and could not come back to college to be interviewed and in the end only three male learners were interviewed but this was a varied group consisting of a learner aged 75 who had been attending for many years, a learner in his fifties who had been sent by the Jobcentre and was on Incapacity Benefit and a learner in his thirties who had been made redundant and after coming to the FLC subsequently obtained employment in the College.

The female learners included one learner from Taiwan whose first language was not English and who had had experience of Higher Education, three learners who had been made redundant after lengthy employment with one employer, a learner who had contracted cancer and in remission was re-assessing her life, a carer with a degree who had devoted her life to her mother, but was now seeking employment, a learner at a crisis point in her life because of a divorce, a young woman who had suffered from a depressive illness and a mother with no post-school education who was looking for a job after the birth of her baby. Some of the learners lived within walking distance of the College, some lived in areas of multiple deprivation, some lived in affluent suburbs while others travelled from deprived areas in other parts of the city. Thus in listening to these learners I obtained views which represented most categories of learners who came to the FLC. In order to ensure that all the learners' voices were heard, each learner's story was included as a mini case study.

<u>Research Techniques</u>

Originally I had also intended to do observations of the interactions between learners and tutors and in fact spent three mornings sitting in the FLC to observe what was happening. The FLC is open plan with desks arranged in pods of four and the only place which has a clear view of the whole area is the tutor's desk which is positioned in front of a window and facing the whole learning area. I found, however, that observing was of limited use as the

interactions are one-to-one episodes, usually instigated by the learners and conducted in very low voices. To hear what was being said I would have needed to move very intrusively and obviously to sit beside the learners and I felt this was too disruptive, especially for those learners who were lacking in confidence. There were practical difficulties about where I should sit as the only place where I could view the whole learning area was the tutor's desk and the learners might therefore conclude that I too was a tutor and ask me for help. The alternative seat was at a table where initial interviews were carried out and this infringed on learners' privacy. Sitting at a computer to do work myself was less obtrusive but it was difficult to see, and impossible to hear, everything that was happening.

The observations yielded numerical data (Appendix 2) such as how many interactions took place between learners and tutors in a particular time frame, the numbers of males and females who asked for help and how long interactions took but these rather arid facts did not reveal to me what the learners and tutors thought and did not illuminate what was really happening as far as learning was concerned. I could see episodes in which one learner monopolised a tutor while others worked on by themselves but I did not know how the learners felt about this, what motivated the learner in needing or obtaining so much attention or anything about the learners' habituses. To understand why one particular learner needed a great deal of help it would have been necessary to speak to him and to hear his story. However, that

would have been impossible in front of other learners and would have destroyed the dynamic of the interaction between learner and tutor. It was also impossible to know if the interactions were influenced by my presence and if the tutors were possibly less active when no one was observing them.

It is true, however, that the observations gave me a general insight into the ambience of the Centre and into how the tutors interacted with the learners and the learners with each other. I saw, for example, two learners supporting each other and the social interaction between learners and reception staff, learners and other learners and learners and tutors. It was useful to see that most support was given with the tutor actually drawing up a chair and sitting beside the learner and talking in a quiet and almost intimate way rather than standing over them as this relationship between learner and tutor was not something I was likely to understand without being physically present in the Centre. It was also interesting to experience the sense of purposiveness of the learners and the high levels of engagement with their work. In this way the observations did help, as Stake puts it (Stake 1995: 62) to 'work the researcher towards a greater understanding of the case' and when I came to the interviews I could appreciate what the learners meant when they talked about the atmosphere of the Centre. I felt, however, that the main focus would be on the interviews as they would provide the most useful data in understanding the learning culture of the Centre.

I based my research procedures on the British Educational Research Association *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (2004) and their *Good Practice in Educational Research Writing* (2000). All the interviewees were given a letter (Appendix 3) explaining the purpose of the research before the interviews and this was also discussed at the beginning of each interview. I wrote the letter in plain English in a very straightforward, and I hope user-friendly way so that everyone could give informed consent. All knew that they could withdraw from the research if they wished at any time, that their anonymity would be respected and that the data would be subject to the Data Protection Act. In order to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, the name of the College, and any other colleges mentioned in the text, along with the names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms. Everyone signed to give their informed consent and no one expressed any concerns.

Every interview was recorded, with the interviewees' permission, on a small and unobtrusive digital recorder and stored on a password- protected laptop as an audio file before being transcribed and stored as a Word document. I found it very helpful being able to listen to the interviewees' voices and when I came to read the transcribed text, I could go back and listen to the original audio files to check for nuances and emphasis and any ambiguities. Listening to the audio files and remembering who the individual learners were, hearing the emotions expressed in their voices and appreciating the strength of their feelings, gave another dimension to the understanding and analysis of the

interviews. Copies of the transcripts were forwarded to my supervisor but no one else has had access to them. Interviewees were offered the chance to read the transcript if they wished but no one took up this offer. Interviewees were also told that they would have access to a report on the findings of the research.

The most sensitive issue was my position as a college manager researching an area for which I am responsible. I was aware that I would have to maintain a reflexive awareness throughout the research so that I did not pre-judge what I might find or set out to provide an apologia for the FLC. However, there was a particular sensitivity when I was interviewing the two tutors, whom I line-managed until December 2008, and whose comments about how they thought the FLC should run and develop could conceivably have been inhibited because I was the interviewer. In fact they seemed to welcome the opportunity to have time to express their thoughts on the FLC to me in a way our usual hurried and action point-dominated meetings precluded. Here Foucault's caveat about membership of institutions affecting people's responses fortunately did not seem to apply (Foucault 1990).

Because there is no history of research in the College there is no ethical committee. I discussed the research and gave an outline of my questions and approach to my then line manager, the Assistant Principal for Quality and Curriculum. He in turn discussed them with the Principal and the Senior

Management Team consisting of the Principal, the Depute Principal and four Assistant Principals. I received full approval for the research and the Principal and my line manager both provided references when I first applied for the programme. I have reported on the research as it progressed.

Methodology: The Role of the Researcher and Narrative Inquiry

My approach was to adopt an interpretative qualitative methodology although I have also made use of some quantitative data to explain the context of the FLC. The basic epistemological position has been summed up by Radnor (2002: 91) and postulates that knowledge is socially constructed in a world of multiple constructed realities. The knowledge I hoped to gain would be constructed through listening to all the different views of the people interviewed, viewed through the lens of my own teaching experience, my managerial experience, my gender and my understanding of the FLC at the particular time I did the research.

I considered initially that what I hoped to achieve would be attainable by using an ethnographic approach, as defined by Genzuk (2003), following the three principles of naturalism, understanding and discovery. Originally I intended to carry out observations in the learning area but the practical problems involved have been outlined above and my second idea of becoming a participant in the FLC myself by undertaking a course and experiencing directly what it was to be a learner proved even more impractical. I enrolled for a course on Excel

spreadsheets, something about which I genuinely needed to know more, but found that it was almost impossible for me to become an ordinary learner as other members of staff seeing me in the FLC would approach me with problems regarding other aspects of my job or just for social conversations. The structure of the FLC, where I was the tutors' manager, meant that the relationship where I was a learner, was artificial and strained. It was impossible to know if the tutors were behaving as they always did or were putting on a special show because I was present. I came to understand as I read more and reflected more that the classic ethnographic approach was not possible for me. I could never be a true participant because of my role and the tutors' role in the College structure and I could never manage a longitudinal study over a lengthy period of time. This was only possible for me as far as quantitative data was concerned but was not possible with the interviewees over a longer time span than a year. One major difficulty here was that the learners were in some cases only present in the FLC for a few months, or in some cases only a few weeks, and once they left were not always traceable.

My research did not fall into the action research approach either which is seen as the most appropriate for FE in the eyes of the Scottish Funding Council, with the idea that interventions will bring measurable improvements. I did not intend to try out interventions but to illuminate how learning was happening in the FLC, although of course that could in itself lead to interventions in the future.

MacLure (2003) has analysed what she calls the ethnographic present, the idea of approaching the subject from the outside and providing a frame round the community which is the object of the research. In the world of ethnographical examinations of 'native' cultures, the 'othering' of other cultures has been critiqued (MacLure 2003: 99). The response to this of trying to present the view from the inside has led to feminist methodology and prioritisation of 'vernacular, personal accounts such as narrative anecdote, life stories and journals.' This has led to conversational interview techniques and the freeing of the voice of the subject (MacLure: 100). Webster and Mertova (2007: ix) argue that listening to the learners' voices and stories of human experience is to avoid what they describe as the burrowing and narrowing nature of other research traditions. MacLure, however, is critical of the supposed innocence of the insider view because the researcher of necessity acts as a broker between inside and outside.

MacLure has analysed very perceptively the metaphors used to describe research ranging from the metaphor of mining, of digging down to find the truth (a variant of which is beloved by auditors and their 'drilling down') to chemical metaphors of distillation and finally engineering metaphors of triangulation. These are all very masculine metaphors from the scientific paradigm which pre-suppose that there is an absolute truth waiting to be found and did not fit well with what I was trying to do. She is sceptical of all these concepts and I found her alternative metaphorical approach of 'entanglement' very convincing

(MacLure 2003: 128). According to MacLure the relationship between the researcher and the subject requires a new metaphor of fabrication (MacLure 2003: 128) to conceptualise the researcher 'inescapably caught up in the weave of the life story'. She contends that the texts produced by researchers and subjects are therefore always fabrications

> …weaving something new yet assembled out of fragments and recollections of other fabrications, such as the interview 'data' and field notes as well as the scattered traces of innumerable other cultural texts of identity, policy, institutional life, career, curriculum and so on (MacLure 2003: 127).

She quotes Rambo Ronai's analysis of the researcher's role:

> The meaning of being a researcher or a dancer is not inherently present in itself. These identities exist in the traces of the past and the context of the unfolding situation as it dissolves into the future. The final meaning of what it means to be a researcher or dancer is always deferred because there is no absolute starting point from which to triangulate these identities (MacLure 2003: 129).

In researching identities, therefore, and in adopting a researcher identity myself, I am necessarily exploring and creating something shifting, difficult to pin down, always in a state of becoming. The reference to dancers also recalls the philosophical question couched by Yeats:

> *O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,*
> *How can we know the dancer from the dance?*
>
> (Yeats: *Among School Children VIII*).

For those who follow the positivist tradition, this approach would be condemned as vague, inconclusive and incapable of meeting the criteria of reliability and

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validity. Indeed, MacLure argues that qualitative methodology continues to operate most of the time in avoidance or denial of the possibility that people might routinely play with personae and levels of reality. As she explains

> ...identity and therefore life history is *always* a matter of copies, imitations and forgeries. Identity is always deferred and in process of becoming (MacLure: 131).

For MacLure, therefore, the researcher is neither in a critical discourse paradigm nor a conversational analysis paradigm but investigating 'the connections between the fine grain of language and action (what people actually say and do) and the broader sweep of Discourses with a big D' (MacLure: 191).

There are similarities in this position with that advocated by Hodkinson et al (2005 b) in their reflections on the Transforming Learning Cultures project which takes a holistic approach to research. They critique earlier approaches which assumed a realist position where the researcher would discover a real world through a rigorous objective method (Hodkinson et al 2005: 3). An alternative approach of seeing the researcher as a person who actively constructs a meaningful story out of the data is the one which appealed to me. To reveal this meaningful story, the actual method I adopted was what Clandinin and Connelly call Narrative Inquiry, based on the premise that experience happens narratively, therefore educational experience should be studied narratively (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 19). Narrative Inquiry has

recently been explored as a research tool by Webster and Mertova (2007). They see its appeal as largely in its ability to explore and communicate internal and external experience recognising that there is no objective truth and so research should emerge from a 'human-centred holistic perspective, maintaining that there are subjective, multiple truths' (Webster and Mertova 2007: 11). Although the policy agenda forms the frame within which the research is set, learners' stories then become at the centre of the research with a recognition that all stories depend on recollections which vary from person to person, change over time and may be different according to the audience who listens to them. For Webster and Mertova (2007: 74), a critical events approach to narrative is adopted by which they mean analysis of change experiences which have challenged the story teller's understanding and world view. I am not convinced that the experience of coming to the FLC is likely to challenge the learners' world views but in several cases their coming to the FLC had challenged their perception of their identities, their place in society and had opened up possible horizons to them which did not seem options before.

The focus therefore, was on the storied experience of individuals and their educational journeys both in the FLC and earlier in their lives, the dispositions which were part of the factors which together made up their habituses and the intention was to move from the field texts which were the interviews themselves to constructing the thesis which grew out of the repeated asking of questions

concerning meaning and significance. My task as an inquirer, was, as

Clandinin and Connelly put it to look for

> …patterns, narrative threads, tensions and themes either within or across an individual's experience and in the social setting (Clandinin and Connelly: 133).

The narrative inquiry method used explored the context of the learners' and

tutors' past, present and future because I accept the premise that people

provide through linking life experience with particular events, deep insight into

life choices and chances (Stuart 2006: 165). This focus on individuals' learning

biographies and trajectories, relates within a very small compass to the similar

focus of the Learning Lives Project. Whereas the LLP explored the significance

of learning in general in people's lives in a far-ranging longitudinal study, my

small study explored the significance of one particular learning culture in the

lives of individual learners. Although the FLC was explored in terms of

structures such as policy frameworks and institutional structures this was not in

itself enough and the processes by which individuals engage with these

structures was also studied. To understand what is happening in the FLC the

positivist emphasis on the individual and the aggregation of individualist data

would not provide the illumination which I was seeking. I wanted to explore

learner and tutor constructs of learning, employability and identity which would

be influenced by many factors and can only be revealed by listening to the

voices of the participants. I am very aware that these voices may well be

contradictory and have been mediated through my own presence as a

participant in the interview.

During this process, Bourdieu's theoretical approach helped me to understand

my own role as a researcher. Grenfell and James explain that:

> This act of *reflexion* involves a positioning of oneself in relation to fields
> (and therefore capital of various kinds) so as to reveal as much as
> possible of the nature and sources and maintenance of one's *interest.*
> (Grenfell and James 1998: 126, emphasis in original).

I came to this research in the latter part of my working life, rather than at the

beginning as would be the case for most university researchers. This meant

that I had something in common with the learners interviewed for I too came

under the category of an older learner. Like them I was learning something

where I felt challenged by the knowledge that others had become expert in the

field at a much younger age. Just as the FLC learners and tutors operated in

an isolated and restricted field, once I moved from the taught part of the

doctorate I felt myself also isolated, not really part of the academic research

community but gradually learning the rules and values of an academic research

field which was quite different from the field of FE colleges. Gradually the

theoretical approaches to research, which in the first two years of the course

had seemed to me to be quite esoteric, began to make sense as I experienced

the reality of being a researcher with all the decisions and positionings this

involved. Following Grenfell and James' application of Bourdieu's concept of

reflexivity I came to understand how my own social trajectory and location

within various fields impacted on my research and I would like to give a brief

outline of this to put the findings of the study more clearly in context.

Neither of my parents went to university and my father in fact was the classic adult returner, leaving school at an early age and drifting from one manual job to another until he emigrated to America to join a married sister who had settled there. Returning to Scotland after three years because of his mother's terminal illness he borrowed money from older sisters to gain the qualifications to enter what was then commercial college and eventually qualified as a teacher. Unlike my father and many of the interviewees I enjoyed my secondary school and was successful there and at university. I trained as a school teacher but after two years, moved into further education. From the start I found working in FE much more satisfying than school teaching because of the different ethos and, at that time, the more adult learner cohort. I also had a strong belief in the importance of lifelong learning and a deep dislike of the school system at that period when the belt reigned supreme.

This conventional lower middle class trajectory might not seem to position me as sharing much in my habitus with most of the interviewees but I found that other aspects of my habitus enabled me to understand their dispositions. I have seen the operating of the secondary school system in a completely different light because one of my sons has an autistic spectrum disorder and so I have experienced what it means to be the parent of a child who is not succeeding. I have seen what bullying can do to such a child and so could understand where one interviewee was coming from when she spoke of being bullied and I could also understand how negative dispositions to formal learning

could be built up. I could understand how Alexis and Katherine (all names have been changed) felt as the mothers of children with disabilities and how draining it can be to have to fight on a child's behalf.

After my children were born I became a full time mother for a number of years and so I can appreciate what it feels like to take the huge step of going back to work. I can even remember being in the classic situation of lacking IT skills and having little opportunity to access my husband's computer. Although I have never been made redundant as three of the learners were, I have accompanied my autistic son to Jobcentres and have seen at first hand the rigid and inflexible benefits system and the whole dismal ambience of these places with their depressed or sometimes aggressive clients and their often unsympathetic staff. All of these experiences helped me to understand the habituses of the people I interviewed and in turn how these were affected by the learning culture.

Like Reay, I have found Bourdieu useful to 'grasp at a conscious level my own dispositions' in order to make sense of the dispositions of those I have interviewed (Reay in Grenfell and James: 127). I am very aware that I am embedded in the research field I am researching as a member of college management and actually also because my son attended the Centre after leaving school. His success in gaining ECDL at the Centre was an early example to me of how the Centre could offer opportunity for someone who could not succeed in conventional classes. This clearly has affected my

dispositions towards the Centre as I can offer personal testimony to its efficacy and am therefore pre-disposed to come to its defence in my management role if it is under attack. In inviting readers to consider my conclusions therefore, I am making transparent my own habitus and my position as part of the research.

Data Collection

Quantitative data about the learners, however, was also utilised. This was gathered from the student database which gave basic statistical data about the number of enrolments and details of the gender, age and post code of those enrolling. This information was obtained from enrolment forms completed in the FLC and then submitted to the database staff. The data was easily accessed in the form of spreadsheets annually and for the research the period 2005-2007 was covered and was supplemented with data on post codes and their link to indices of multiple deprivation.

The main instrument of data collection, nevertheless, was through one-to-one episodic interviews, inviting interviewees to present narratives of situations from their everyday knowledge of the FLC and from their own life history and experiences of education. The questions included direct invitations to recount concrete events such as what was the interviewees' experience on their first visit to the FLC and more general questions such as the impact of coming to the FLC on their lives. I find Flick's argument convincing that this kind of episodic interview enables the researcher to tap into the subjective world of the

interviewee more effectively than in the kind of interview where the questions may exclude some responses (Flick 1998). At the same time the episodic interview avoids the difficulties of asking interviewees to produce one narrative by asking for several delimited narratives related to the research questions. Different learner interviews developed in different ways with some interviewees staying on at the end of the interview to chat more generally and some digressing to other topics in the course of the interview.

The interviews were held in my office which at that time was one of a group of management offices in an administration block of the College and was therefore quite separate from the FLC. On the one hand, this space was not ideal for the interviews as it perhaps underlined my role in the College structure which a more neutral space would not have done but there was nowhere in the Learning Centre where we could have had privacy. On the other hand, being aware of my role in the College in a sense legitimised the research as the interviewees knew it served a practical purpose and was relevant to the Centre's future. The other advantage was that I could divert my phone, put a notice on the door saying 'Interviews in progress' and know that I would not be interrupted.

Some of the interviews revealed very sensitive feelings and depth of emotions that to me indicated the conversation which was held had established connections between me and the interviewees which made sharing these

feelings possible. West (1996) has suggested that an interviewer is more likely to succeed in interviewing disadvantaged learners if he/she comes from a disadvantaged background and has suggested that the more interviewees bare their souls, the more the interviewer should offer something of him/herself and his/her story. The learners came from a range of backgrounds but as already discussed, there were some to whom I specifically related, for example two learners with children with disabilities of one kind or another as I have a son with a disability. This of course raises the question, if West is right ,whether interviewers should actually reflect the learners' backgrounds and if so how could I empathise with those from a different background to my own? Carried to its logical conclusion, there would have to be a range of interviewers for different learners and this is a fundamentally impractical, and perhaps also ultimately patronising concept. I believe as someone who has worked in FE for many years and has taught Communication to classes across all faculties, I can empathise with learners regardless of background. I accept that it was probably easier for me to relate to female interviewees' experiences because of my gender but did not feel that the three male interviewees were ill at ease speaking to me. I am not convinced that the type of interview I was doing was the place for me to reveal my own story in any depth, although connections were made with the feelings expressed by the interviewees.

Some of the interviewees required more prompting than others but all engaged with the questions. I took notes in case there were any glitches with the digital

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recorder but luckily everything recorded successfully. The only question where I think my own assumptions were completely over-turned was the initial question asking the learners what they remembered of their first day at school. I thought this would be an easy starter and would elicit vivid memories as my own memories of my first day at school are particularly vivid but several people had no memory at all of that first day. Similarly I was surprised to find that almost all the learners remembered the primary school with a kind of fondness, whereas my own memories of the primary school were mostly negative and this brought home to me very strongly the danger of making assumptions about the universality of personal experience.

Data Analysis

My initial plan was to undertake the kind of interpretivist approach advocated by Radnor. I found that her initial explanation of interpretive research as

> …trying to come to an understanding of the world of the research participants and what that world means to them (Radnor 2002: 29, original emphasis).

resonated with my own idea of my research. However, her metaphor of the researcher as a potter working with the raw material (Radnor 2002: 29) in an interactive and sensitive way, although interesting, as it departs from the usual positivist metaphors of digging and drilling, elevates the researcher to a role as a kind of creator, making something new out of material which he/she shapes, moulds, heats and re-creates. Thus out of the original texts, something completely new is created. I was not convinced that this was what I actually

wanted to happen. The question arose if we are giving a voice to people who are not usually heard, whether we really want to transform that voice or voices into something we create ourselves. My instinctive feeling was that this was not quite compatible with what I was trying to do.

Radnor, in common with many other writers on research including Polkingthorne (1995), Mason (1996), Ritchie and Spencer (1994), Dey (1993) and May (1997) advocates coding and categorising the data and I initially attempted to do this, but in trying to do this I found I was losing sight of what the interviewees were actually saying and instead of synthesising my understanding of the data, I was fragmenting it and was failing to gain an overall understanding of the answers to my research questions.

As a practitioner rather than a university researcher, I thought initially that my problems with this analytical approach were probably the result of my own lack of expertise in research methods, however, I was very heartened to come across a Colley and Diment (2001) reflection on research which seemed to me very convincing. The fact that they were actually researchers in FE and also PhD students struggling to analyse FE data gave their arguments an immediacy and a relevance for me while the wider framework of the Transforming Learning Cultures in FE Project provided a theoretical underpinning I found sympathetic. They put it like this:

> We will argue for holism in FE practice and educational research in its original sense – as an approach that regards any human and social subject

as a totally integrated system rather than as a sum of articulated parts, and which seeks to ensure that analysis illuminates rather than obscures the wider perspective that is so essential to making sense of educational processes (Colley and Diment 2001: 5).

Colley and Diment go on to critique the coding and categorising approach in the FE context thus:

> In practice, when researching issues of considerable complexity, that required individual experiences to be located in much wider social and economic structures, we found that standard coding techniques fragmented highly personal stories, distorted key issues, and over-simplified complex processes (Colley and Diment 2001: 14).

This was precisely the conclusion that I had been reaching myself. If analysis means taking apart, as Colley and Diment point out, then it seems to me there is a danger that what the FE researcher may be left with are the dissected remains of the educational experiences of the learners without any real understanding of what these individual experiences mean in terms of the wider picture. Colley's conclusion is that for her what works is a kind of narrative analysis, something she calls 'radial narration' which derives from a Celtic tradition which circles about, repeats and elaborates a central theme (Colley and Diment 2001: 13).

I wanted to build up an understanding of individual experiences within the learning culture context and also as a practitioner to produce something which would be understandable to my colleagues within the College and in the wider field of Scotland's colleges. I think there is a valid argument to be made for practitioners as researchers having a different perspective from academics who

research from within the very different world of academia. This is not to contend that such practitioner research should be less rigorous but that there is an imperative of more accessibility in the analysis and what conclusions can be drawn from it. The research was about individuals' stories, the enmeshing of these stories within the social and educational network of the Learning Centre and the wider relevance of these stories within the policy framework of Scotland's colleges.

As already outlined, my analysis leant heavily on some of the key concepts first advocated by Bourdieu, particularly concepts used to understand the idea of a learning culture, which has underpinned the work of prominent academics writing about FE including Grenfell and James(1998), James and Bloomer (2001), Gallacher et al (2002), Field (2005) and James and Biesta (2007). This will be explored in more depth when analysing the data.

I am presenting my research as a narrative which will have to be summarised in an accessible form for the participants and College management and written in an accessible form for colleagues who are not researchers, for perhaps Scotland's Colleges *Broadcast* magazine, as well as in the standard academic format for possible publication elsewhere.

The outcomes of the research should be as follows:

- A deepened understanding of the learning culture in the FLC and an evaluation of the role of the FLC against the background of lifelong learning, employability and economic policy agendas;

- A basis for future planning for the FLC;

- Suggestions for applying this approach to learning in other learning situations for the groups which particularly benefit from it;

- A raised awareness of practitioner research in the College and the possibility of encouraging other staff to undertake research to illuminate other learning cultures within the College.

Conclusion

Using narrative inquiry provided rich data which were used to answer the research questions. The episodic interviews gave space and opportunity for the learners to narrate their own experiences of coming to the FLC and to relate this to their life histories and earlier experiences of education. The tutors were able to expound their theories of learning and teaching and all the narratives yielded links and themes which helped to answer the wider questions about the relevance of employability and about learner and tutor identities.

Chapter 5: The Learning Culture of The Flexible Learning Centre

Some people in our class were stupid, full stop

The leather tawse was coiled around the sweetie tin

In her desk beside the box of coloured blackboard chalk

Miss Ferguson never used.

Liz Lochead: *Teachers*

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the unique features of the FLC learning culture, looking at where the FLC is situated in the College organisation, who the learners are who attend and the nature of the learning which takes place. The features of the learner cohort are identified and concepts of learner and tutor identity and social capital applied in this context.

The Flexible Learning Centre in the Field of the College

As already outlined, in the structure of the College, the FLC is situated in an anomalous position. All other courses involving the use of ICT are situated in the Information Technology and Business Management Faculty with an infrastructure of course teams and senior subject lecturers. The FLC however, along with the College library, is part of the Learning Development Unit which is an umbrella unit covering various aspects of learning including CPD, Guidance, Quality and Learning Innovation. Historically, the FLC had a Senior Lecturer

whose remit was promoting Flexible Learning but this post was abolished in 2001 when the College management system was re-structured and up until January 2009 the FLC functioned with the Librarian/LITEhouse Manager having operational management responsibility. This impacted on the learning culture of the FLC and the tutors became to an extent cut off from the normal internal subject processes of the College, largely autonomous, deciding their own curriculum but constrained by the financial imperatives of the College.

Profile of Learners: Age and Gender

The Flexible Learning Centre, according to College statistics, attracted some 302 learners in 2005/6 and 347 in 2006/7. The statistics present a picture of a predominantly female learner cohort, with an average percentage over the two sessions of 60.52% being female. This is a slightly higher picture than the overall picture of 57% of female learners in FE at the time of the study, according to the Association of Scottish Colleges Keyfacts (ASCOL 2006). However the number of male learners compares relatively favourably with the situation of the nearest point of reference to FLCs – community learning centres. These centres have the similarities of a more supportive atmosphere than mainstream campuses with a closer relationship between staff and students. However, the mode of learning is different and significantly a recent study (Cleary 2007) found figures of female participation of between 69% and 76% in community learning centres studied. Again a study by Faulkner and Kleif (2005) of a rural ICT initiative found that men of working age did not

engage at all with the centre which was seen as a women's space and was staffed by women.

At the FLC the picture is rather different. In each year the numbers of retired males attending were relatively small (9 out of 125 males in 2005/6 and 19 out of 130 males in 2006/7). The FLC therefore appears to be attracting significant numbers of male learners of employable age despite the perceived difficulty of attracting this cohort.

For both men and women the period in the life-course between 40 and 65 seemed to be the peak time for undertaking FLC courses. The average age of learners was 47.5 in 2005/6 and 47.71 in 2006/7. For almost all, IT skills were something which post-dated their compulsory education and represented a significant skills gap in their lives. Over both years the most popular course studied was Computing and the Internet for Beginners with ECDL, which represents a progression, the second most popular. It is significant that there is a need in the population at large to address their lack of basic IT skills and the Computing and the Internet for Beginners course can be a stepping stone to more advanced study. Social capital played a role in attracting learners to the FLC with the largest group of learners consisting of those who had learned about the centre from a previous learner or a friend.

<u>Reasons for Attendance</u>

The reasons for attendance varied. In the case of women the learning stories recorded show that for some it was because of the empty nest syndrome when full time mothers of school children suddenly have time to do something else but there is still a commitment to being there for them part of the time. Some had skills which are now outdated, for example typewriting or working in industries now almost extinct in Scotland such as the textiles industry.

For other women, this part of the life-course was a time of divorce or redundancy or loss of employment because of accident or ill health. Some suddenly no longer had to care for an elderly parent because of the parent's death or entry into care and the resultant time was freed up. For men, drawing on the interviewees' stories and the stories of other male awardees in the two years, redundancy, accident and the need for specific IT skills in the work place seemed to be the main drivers.

This appears to contradict the findings of McGivney (1999, 2004) and Cleary (2007) that men and women seem to have different reasons for returning to education. They identify that for men this is usually linked to a major life event but state that this is not the case for women. However, 10 of the 12 women interviewed could be seen as returning because of a major life event. Perhaps the nature of the FLC type of learning means that women coping with major life events find the FLC accessible and welcoming, unlike more formal modes of

education. One learner, Alexis spoke of the effort it took just to enter the

building:

> It took me 20 minutes to get through the door and I was actually
> standing outside crying. If they had been in any way uppity or offhand I
> would have walked out that door and it would have completely changed
> what I'm doing right now. And that's how delicate the balance is. They
> were just so nice. They could see I had tears in my eyes. They must
> have thought, 'This is a lunatic', but nothing was a problem.

Other learners were going through life events which led to major shifts in roles

and identity and one key aspect of the FLC's role is to provide what one learner

describes as an 'escape route' and another as an 'escape valve'. The learners'

stories indicated that lack of confidence to attend conventional classes and the

rigid structure of mainstream courses, along with a perceived preponderance of

young learners whom they imagined were expert in IT, were the main barriers

to learning IT skills successfully for several of the learners.

The Flexible Learning Centre: an Adult Learning Culture

Humiliation, embarrassment and failure were the consequences for one learner

of being treated with lack of respect in a mainstream course and here there is

the first crucial point about the learning culture of the FLC: essentially it is an

adult space where adults perceive they are being addressed in an appropriate

register. These adults had in several cases very negative learning experiences

at school or subsequently and required the opportunity to build confidence

before they could succeed. The FLC gave them an opportunity to choose the

pace they wished to adopt and it seemed for them to be of particular

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importance to learn alongside adults rather than alongside young people whom they perceived as ICT experts. The suggestion here is that there is a special difficulty involved for older people in learning IT skills which this learning culture overcomes.

There is a very strong sense that the FLC is not just different from the mainstream courses because of the teaching methodology employed but because of the essentially different cohort of learners who have chosen to come to it and whose dispositions towards learning were mainly formed in an educational culture totally different from that of schools today. That learning culture in Scotland was characterised for some learners by an atmosphere of fear because of the use of physical punishment. The learning culture in the FLC to which they responded positively is one of informality where adults are treated in a friendly way and supported according to how much they seek support and where learners can maintain or regain their own self-respect.

The Socio-economic Background of the Learners

Over the two year period investigated, learners from the 15% most deprived post codes in Scotland (Scottish Executive 2000d) accounted for an average of 47% of FLC learners. This analysis is based on information derived from The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation which divides Scotland up into small data zones and uses 37 indicators of deprivation under the general headings of Income, Employment, Education, Health, Housing and Geographic Access to

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Services. The high percentage is perhaps not surprising as the College is located in the Scottish city which in 2006, out of all local authority areas in Scotland, had at 34%, the highest proportion of areas in this category This is far in advance of the second highest, which had 9% of the total (Scottish Executive 2006e). Another of the College's catchment areas came fourth. The FLC percentage reflects the overall picture of the background of learners in the College and is considerably higher than the sector average of 30% of learners coming from the 20% most deprived post codes (Association of Scottish Colleges 2006). These are obviously the learners least likely to engage in post-compulsory education and the fact that almost half of the FLC learners fall into this category suggests the FLC is playing a significant role in meeting the policy aspiration of reaching disadvantaged learners. The area immediately around the College predictably provided the biggest groups of learners and parts of it appear in the deprivation index. A considerable number of learners came from other areas of deprivation in neighbouring areas. However, it is significant that by contrast 26% of the total number of learners came from affluent suburbs adjacent to the city.

The learner cohort, therefore, was varied in socio-economic background, unlike the restricted and more homogeneous client group who attend community learning centres. The interviewees reflected this composition with four coming from affluent suburbia bordering the city and one from a poorer area neighbouring the city, five from the immediate vicinity of the College including

one from an area where the College maintains an outreach campus, two from another local authority area, and three from areas of deprivation in other parts of the city. Interaction and networking seemed to cross the geographical and social divides especially for the women learners and provided an interesting model of inclusiveness.

The Learning Culture: a Supportive Space

The second aspect of the FLC learning culture was that it seemed to some learners interviewed to offer what West identifies as an attribute of education in general 'a supportive space during periods of profound change and uncertainty' (West 1996: x). All the learners interviewed had had to contend with change and uncertainty. In the context of employability all 15 had worked at some point in their lives but most had had breaks in employment either by choice such as choosing to look after their children or by forces beyond their control such as redundancy or having to care for parents. There is perhaps an aspect of employability here which the policy texts do not address. Their deficit model is of unlocking the potential of younger people with a heavy stress on Skills for Work for school pupils or those who leave school with no work and no qualifications. Several of the learners interviewed had worked, some for many years, but at a later stage in their life-course found the need to update or gain new skills to seek employment. For some finding themselves on benefits was a catastrophic experience and for all their confidence seemed to be at a low ebb. The ethos of the FLC provided support not just in the practicalities of how to

gain computer skills, but by providing opportunities to have a listener at times of crisis and change.

The actual physical space was designed to create a welcoming ambience and several of the learners spoke of its atmosphere of calm and quiet. The learning space is open plan and uncrowded and the tutors have personalised it by bringing in plants and photographs. This is possible because they are the only users of the space, unlike their computing colleagues who share several labs and have no space which is designated personal. In addition the small scale of the actual physical space makes it easier for learners to enter. One put it this way:

> I suppose the other thing about the Flexible Learning, the actual physical place, it's open and you can see it at a glance and you're not kind of, 'Oh do I go down there?'

The tutors have even made up their own slogan with a photograph of the awardees which reads, 'Learning Lives here'. This serves to mark off the FLC as somewhere the tutors perceive is different from the main College and the learning itself is also seen as different. Because the learning is self-directed, time can also be used in a different way from traditional classes. There is no period waiting for a lesson to begin or for everyone to come together after a break, no period when the class sits watching a demo by the lecturer before trying the task for themselves, no episodes of disruptive behaviour. Thus a learner arrives in the FLC, perhaps chats to the reception staff and then goes to start work at a time they have booked. They are also spared the

embarrassment of having to ask to go to the toilet or having to take a break at times decided by the teacher which despite the College supposedly being predominantly geared for teaching adults happens in some mainstream classes.

Learning IT Skills

Haight (2005) has outlined what she sees as special challenges in teaching IT including difficulty in holding the attention of the class because of the ways computing labs are laid out, the ambient noise and the fact that students were engaged in their own activities on their computers when she was trying to teach them. In addition the actual learning environment was usually ugly and soulless. This was in HE where students may be assumed to have possibly higher levels of commitment or concentration than in some FE situations and having observed teaching in Computing classes in Hollypark College, I am aware the problems can be worse than Haight describes. In FE another problem in teaching Computing is that some students may come already highly competent but without paper qualifications and soon become disengaged if they have to plod through work beneath their capabilities because the course is not flexible enough to offer different levels of assessment or work. The FLC, therefore, is offering an individualistic way to learn which avoids these potential triggers for non-engagement and disruption and allows learners to decide how and how fast they wish to undertake courses.

The thinking behind the portfolio of courses is that the IT courses can be taken up by those with no previous experience and can lead to quick success. Conversely, those who are already competent can come in and sit assessments when they think they are ready. Most courses start at beginner level and proceed to intermediate and advanced. This approach equates to what Hallam (2005: 24) recommends as a 'mastery' approach which she thinks is the most effective way to develop an education system for learning throughout life 'which reconciles the needs of the individual and society'. Hallam (2005: 24) believes that this kind of approach where learners aim to improve on their previous performance and continue to develop their knowledge and skills without reference to the progress of other learners, enhances motivation.

This certainly seems to be borne out by what the learners say about their learning. Hallam (2005: 25) has given the example of graded assessments in music, ballet, sport, languages and computer games which provide individuals with challenge and opportunities to demonstrate achievement when they have reached the appropriate level of expertise to attain them and has argued that this kind of mastery approach should be applied to the education system in general. Without entering into discussion of this much wider claim, it seems to be clear that the FLC mastery approach is effective even for learners with no previous history of success in formal education.

The portfolio of courses was widened during the period of the research by the inclusion of online Sage courses on Accounts and Payroll because the tutors had found a demand for these by employers. In incorporating these courses, therefore, there was a conscious effort to improve employability and to recognise the needs of employers and in this there was a clear link with the policy texts.

Many of the courses carry a College certificate rather than external examination accreditation although some SQA courses and the externally assessed ECDL are also offered. For some learners these certificates represent their first learning success since leaving school and are seen as important to present to potential or actual employers. For these learners this may be the first cultural capital they have ever gained. The FLC therefore represents a culture of achievement and a learner may be celebrated just as much for taking months to achieve something, when the tutor knows the background factors which are making success difficult, as for passing something in a few hours. Here the FLC in a very practical way harnesses the power of assessment procedures.

The fact that the FLC concentrates mainly on IT skills is of some significance in itself. Schuller (2002: 23) has identified ICT as having very special benefits for learners:

> Overcoming fear of computers and realising even basic levels of competence in this area were enormously confidence-boosting and made respondents *feel part of the modern world'.* For those who had some ICT experience brushing up on their skills made them feel

equipped to compete in the labour market and for parents and grandparents learning about IT improved relationships with their children and grandchildren. Consequently learning about IT facilitated integration of learners into particular communities – namely, the modern world, their children's worlds and the labour market.

It could be argued in fact that formal classes in IT skills are particularly difficult for older learners because they often rely on demonstrations by the lecturer which anyone whose eyesight is not excellent has difficulty in even seeing. Going to such a class and failing, as in the case of Grace, one of the interviewees, can increase technophobia and a sense of worthlessness. Over the past few years, there has been a decline in learners choosing to pursue ECDL in traditional classes in the College and a huge rise in those taking the course at the FLC. At present, for example, over 100 learners are enrolled on ECDL in the FLC and there are no longer any classes in the Business School. Anyone who has ever sat through IT training and struggled to keep up, will appreciate why the FLC approach can work so much better. The learner is not expected to move on at the same time as everyone else and can decide the level of interaction with the tutor. They do not need to have any inhibitions about asking for help because they are not competing with others around them and so can feel safe to admit the need for help. This is in contrast to the traditional IT lesson where learners can feel left behind and humiliated if they cannot keep up as the class moves on. As one learner explained:

> A big class for me isn't any use particularly if you're going in when you're older. You've absolutely no confidence altogether. You don't really want to do it but you've got to do it. And you add to that a mainstream class where we're all on to question 2 and you're terrified to look a complete idiot.

Learners and Students

The FLC, therefore, is a learning culture where the mainly older learners come through choice and learn in the company largely of people in the same age group. Edwards has identified the education and training of older adults as being 'at the margin of the margins' (Edwards 1997: 62) and the FLC learners could be seen at the margins of the margins of the margins as they are marginalised in several ways. Much of the corporate student life focuses on activities for young full-time students and although colleges are encouraged to foster student engagement this is predicated on dealing with class representatives, something impossible when there are no fixed classes.

Some of the interviewees did in fact differentiate between themselves as learners and other College students. Bryony, a mother in her thirties, made a clear distinction between what she was doing and what students on mainstream courses were doing. She related that she did not think of herself as a student and when her husband asked her, 'Is that you a student for the day?' she replied, 'A student? Students walk about with folders and all that.' The husband's question is apparently teasing as he sees her as being transformed like Cinderella at the Ball into a different identity. On the other hand, it is possible his question may be patriarchal with an implicit suggestion that after her day as a student she reverts to her true role in the house. In general, however, the term 'learner' rather than student is used consistently in the FLC while the College official publications and the Keyfacts about

Scotland's colleges (Association of Scotland's Colleges 2006) always refer to students. The FLC learners, however, are more practically orientated than their mainstream colleagues. The courses do not entail study in the sense of learning and analysing complex information and ideas, instead they enable learners to develop mastery of practical ICT skills or Accounting and Payroll skills. This learning is only part of their lives and often serves an essentially practical purpose – to fill in the unstructured hours of unemployment, to connect with the modern world, to provide skills for a job or to maintain mental health in retirement.

At this particular time in the 21st Century then, the FLC seems to perform a valuable role in connecting with the modern world those who have missed out on the essential computer skills, which pervade every aspect of life. It does this by presenting them with easily achievable goals through courses which can be passed quickly initially. These can lead to more complex courses but the learner can decide how long they want to take to overtake the outcomes. In the case of ECDL, for example, they can take up to a year to overtake the seven modules instead of the thirteen weeks this would take in a conventional class. On the other hand, if they wish to do the course in a very short intense period of time, they can choose to do this also. In a sense, therefore, the learner is empowered to direct his/her own learning here, although this is done in agreement with the tutor. This is the third noticeable aspect of the learning

culture and this individual approach to assessment and completion would not be possible in any other courses in the College.

Wounding Learning Experiences and Technophobia

It was noticeable that for several of the learners, their compulsory education had been characterised by fear. In the Flexible Learning Centre, there is no streaming or levelling and no one is measured against anyone else. Everyone starts at a level he/she helps to determine in negotiation with the tutor. It is an adult environment where fear is something to be overcome with encouragement and support, unlike the schools of the past which in Scotland to an extent had a culture of fear. Fourteen of the 15 learners had gone to school in an era when corporal punishment was the norm and fear was a weapon in the armoury of the teachers. Even a learner who did well at school, Helen, remembered it as a place of terror:

> I was terrified out of my wits because the first thing you saw when you went into any teacher's class was the belt on the teacher's desk and I'd been completely unused to corporal punishment. So I basically spent six years in secondary school shaking, scared of being belted.

For learners who have had such experiences, what Wojecki (2007) has called wounding learning practices, which he sees as leaving an indelible mark upon the learner's identity, the alternative world of the FLC offers a chance to succeed in an environment free of the fear of the powerful and authoritarian figure of the school teacher. This is not to say of course, that the tutor is not in a powerful position for, as the holder of knowledge, the person who can in the eyes of the learners answer all of their questions and solve all of their problems

he certainly is. Rogers (2003) has put forward very interesting ideas on the construct of students and 'teachers' in adult education. He has foregrounded the concept of hybridity which involves agency, power and movement and argues that adult learners often construct themselves in a hybrid made up of adult and student. He points out that some adult students wish to be taught in a formalised pattern, 'surrendering their more horizontal adult constructs in favour of more hierarchical student constructs' (Rogers 2003: 68). This hybrid concept comes across very strongly when what the tutors and learners have to say about their roles is analysed for on the one hand the learners appreciate being treated as adults, but on the other they look up to the tutor for answers and help.

Some of the learners felt forced to undertake skills acquisition because without it they perceived themselves as of no interest to employers. However even those learners found the FLC a place of calm and quiet where they could work at their own pace without fear of failure. In this it is very similar to what Gallacher et al (2002: 505) discovered about community learning centres where the teaching approaches favoured by adult returners included being able to work at their own pace, tutors who could talk to them at their level, positive encouragement and tutors who made learning enjoyable in a relaxed atmosphere where they took a personal interest in the well-being of students and were aware and sympathetic to personal interests in the students' lives.

There is, however, a different kind of fear for many of the learners, even for those who may have achieved advanced qualifications or professional standing at some earlier point in their lives. This is fear of the computer itself - technophobia. This technophobia is one of four discourses discussed by Selwyn (2003a: 102) as leading people to decide to reject or to fail to engage with technology. The tutors see themselves as helping to overcome this technophobia and the gaining of self confidence is seen as one of the most important achievements of the learners. This would seem to be corroborated by Schuller et al (2002: 15) who concluded that in a striking number of cases the strongest effect of learning to handle a computer is to improve the learner's overall confidence.

In other forms of learning it may be more difficult to see clear progress and indeed in some cases failing to progress can be affected by a complex range of factors including previous failures at school or elsewhere, but learning IT skills usually comes without previous baggage in the subject and it is possible very quickly to see concrete progress in mastering the basics of using a computer and to have the sense of moving on. The tutors tell stories of learners' joy in achieving what would be seen elsewhere as very small successes and the learning culture actively creates opportunities for success. For the FLC learners, learning was very close to what Wenger has described as 'a horizontal process of mutual negotiation, as opposed to the more traditional view of a vertical relationship between a producer and a recipient of knowledge'

(Wenger 2005: 5). The learner negotiates with the tutor the course, when they will sit assessments and how much support they will need. Grace and Louise, for example, started with a course which was too difficult for them and realised that they were not coping. Louise then took the decision to switch to another course:

> So after doing it for a day I just went to Jim and said, 'I can't do this. This is too much.' You know there's no point in proceeding with this and calling him over every two minutes. It's just no gonnae work. So we decided to go with a sort of another course, another easier course initially.

Here, the learner took the initiative and there was a strong sense of agency rather than failure. Such self-assessment and choice of appropriate learning would not be possible within the standard programmes of the College. Similarly the mutually supportive learning in which she and her friend tackled the courses together, with the stronger learner supporting the weaker, is not something easily attained in conventional classes where decisions about what to learn and when to be assessed are taken solely by the lecturer and working together may well be seen as cheating.

Social Capital and Underground Working

At first sight, the FLC consists of entirely independent learners sitting at their computers in isolation, working quietly through their pre-determined courses. However, the story of Grace and Louise, illustrates that strong bonds of friendship may bring friends to the FLC where they may choose to learn together. Last year, 159 of the learners had found out about the FLC from a

previous learner and 64 from friends. The interviews revealed a network of relationships among learners, some originating within their community where they encouraged each other to come to the FLC and some of which had developed within the FLC. Thus it appears that learners may be utilising bonding social capital they share with relatives and close friends within their communities to find out about the FLC and to make the decision to attend and when they come they may develop bridging social capital, which Field (2005) has defined as more distant ties with people in a like situation. It is also possible they may develop linking social capital by forming ties with dissimilar people who come to the FLC and who are outwith their communities. The relationship with the tutors and administration staff also creates social capital, giving opportunities for providing references for those applying for jobs who have no referees and in some cases forming personal friendships which continue outside the space of the Learning Centre.

Underlying the FLC is an awareness in the tutors of being different in their pedagogy from the rest of the College. Both the tutors' dispositions are characterised by viewing their role as nurturing and supporting the learners, some of whom become personal friends to them. This is interesting as it conflicts with Coffield's advice about relationships between FE staff and their learners, where he states:

> ...you're not there to become the learners' new friend; they already have friends. You are there as a professional to help all of them achieve their learning goals (Coffield 2008: 49).

When teaching younger learners in mainstream classes, Coffield's advice

makes complete sense as their friends are likely to be their peers rather than

their lecturers who have different generational interests. The relationship

between FLC learners and tutors, however, is a different one, partly because

there is not the generational gap. In some cases also the learners may be very

isolated individuals with few or no friends. The personal nature of the stories

which had been shared indicated a more friendly relationship with the tutors

than with lecturers in mainstream classes and the difference in the relationships

from those with mainstream lecturers can be illustrated by one example. By

chance one of the interviewees was someone who had been in a class on a

mainstream course which I had taught ten years previously. The class had 25

students and although I remembered her and knew her by name, I had no idea

of her personal life. By contrast, she had shared with the FLC tutors intimate

details of her life as a lone parent and saw them as friends.

The older tutor, Yusef, explained his philosophy of flexible learning as follows:

> So the Flexible Learning Centre as a convergence point (between online
> and face to face delivery) provided a human interaction, closer support
> to the learner making the learning more individualised or individualising
> the learning process, setting tasks and activities that they tailor to the
> learner need in the workforce or in the community or at home, providing
> an empathy template that is warming and welcoming where the learner
> feels part of the learning group where they meet other learners which is
> less likely to be in a class, unless they meet in a canteen or coffee room.

This concept of the learners forming a learning group is not perhaps borne out

by what is actually happening in the FLC as the learning is individual and some

of the learners actually spoke only to the tutors. It is possible, however, that

more informal learning may be going on outside the learning which takes place in the learning space but there is perhaps a need to foster the social aspect of the FLC more strongly. Since the research was carried out an online learning community has been created for ECDL learners, who comprise over 25% of the learners, which may strengthen bonds among this group.

The other point made about providing a convergence between online and face-to-face is interesting. In the FLC the tutor does not deliver courses or demonstrate skills. The materials are paper based for most of the courses and the learner uses them to proceed step by step through the course, practising his skills and checking his knowledge. The exception to this, ECDL, has materials on screen but follows a similar step by step progress. In theory the learners could take these materials home and learn without any tutor presence at all. However, Yusef states that the tutor can suggest extensions to the course and encourage reflexive learning as well as dealing with difficulties and problems:

> For example, if someone is sitting and doing Microsoft Word – they can follow the materials in Microsoft Word and carry out a task. Some of them, they go home and that task really didn't work or they wanted an extra addition to that task. They found that they are unable to do it and they feel that it's a weakness in them. They come back and speak to the tutor, and the tutor is sometimes… that is what the constructivist nature is that they take the extra help and provide them with exercises that really are not part of the materials, so they are constructing knowledge and creating new knowledge which does not actually exist in the materials itself.

> They are more, it's like they become curious about their learning and move forward and branch their learning to other. It opens the scope to them, the time when they come to the Flexible Learning Centre and

study a course, and when they leave, they start thinking and they become reflective. They say 'Oh, how could I do that? How could I improve on this?' and basically because many of our learners are at work so they actually mix in what they're learning and what they're doing at work at the same time.

Yusef's meaning when he says that the learners "branch their learning to other" appears to be that learners build on what they have learned and extend their learning while those who are at work utilise what they have learned in the Centre. He also argues that:

> In contrast to the class, the tutor does not impose the teaching style: they actually have to look at the learner's style and start to adapt the learner style to teaching style. So it works the other way, where the teacher imposes a style to the whole class. We don't impose one style. So that comes through experience and more knowledge on learning in the field of dealing with flexible learners.

Leaving aside the fact that learning styles are a contested concept (Coffield et al 2004) the approach to learning in the FLC does not in reality accommodate a variety of different ways of learning. There is no option except to use the materials or supplement them, although certainly the learner can skip parts of the course but there are general constraints such as they have to learn mostly in silence without conversations with other learners; they cannot have lengthy one to one sessions because of the practical limitations of up to 20 learners following different courses with only one tutor present to assist all of them and there is no group work and little collaborative learning. However, perhaps the significant point here is that Yusef perceives himself as adapting his style to his learners and he adapts his materials to suit them and his belief that learners come first is crucial in this learning culture.

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The second tutor had a more pragmatic view of why learners come to the FLC:

> The actual method of working I think is something that appeals to a lot of people. The fact that they can come in and almost be anonymous. They can get on with their course sitting next to someone who's doing a completely different course.

He focused on the idea of anonymity and learners working:

> And basically the actual method of working, the actual supported self study, I think that's a draw in itself that people know that they can work at their own pace and that they're not under any pressure to keep up with anyone else. They know they have a notional time limit on the course. You know, we're sort of keeping an eye on them, but we do sort of let them very much do it their way within reason so I think that's something else that appeals.

> I think the fact that we do have a bit of a separate identity as well, the fact that we're in a separate building, is a draw for a lot of learners and they're not coming into the sort of the hubbub, the sort of main College if you like. I think that's certainly something. I think there are many reasons why people arrive at us in the first place. That's certainly the main ones.

Being physically separate from the main College is important in the definition of the Learning Centre by the tutor and also for some learners. Corridors thronged with noisy young students in the large main building can be intimidating for older learners. The personalised features of the FLC also convey a message that this is a place where learners are seen as people and the tutors are grounded in their own place which they have customised. The photographs of learners taken at the annual Celebration of Learning and displayed in the FLC illustrate not only the message that success is possible or probable for everyone, but also the underground working which the tutors employ beyond their job description. The Celebration is followed by a buffet lunch and traditionally the tutors and reception staff buy all the food

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themselves, re-arrange the learning area, lay out the lunch and clear everything afterwards. They also arrange a Christmas lunch for learners and their friends and decorate the FLC at Christmas, unlike the decidedly non-festive College classrooms. Other examples of underground working are helping learners with problems with their home computers or giving advice about job-seeking or help in constructing CVs or other documents.

Clearly the tutors have developed a loyalty and a commitment to the FLC rather than to the wider College, and their dispositions as predominantly caring individuals have resulted in a learning culture where, as one learner says, 'They don't allow you to fail'. Obviously this statement cannot be taken as literally true as, for example, ECDL involves sitting objective tests which the individual may fail despite the best efforts of the tutor but the general ethos of support is true. While this could be criticised as making it more difficult for learners to move on to more challenging educational environments where failure is definitely more easily possible, it could be argued that for some learners moving on is not really what they want anyway and especially for those who did not flourish at school or who suffer from technophobia, achievable success at a relatively low level is worthwhile in itself.

Conclusion

The FLC, therefore, is a distinct learning culture within Hollypark College which appears to offer a way of acquiring IT skills which is more effective for many

learners, especially older learners, than the conventional classroom approach. It offers opportunities to build bridging and linking social capital for some learners and this may be as important for them as fostering employability or increasing skills acquisition. The social capital accrued may be in links formed with the tutors which continue after their time at the FLC has finished and/or with other learners.

For some of the learners it is a place they have come to after negative experiences of education at school or other colleges and they see the tutors as distinctly different from teachers. The tutors place a high value on their work in the FLC and commonly employ underground working to enhance its success.

Chapter 6: The Learners: Employability and Well-being

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past
F Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*

<u>Introduction</u>

In this chapter I focus on the learners' narratives to answer the questions about

employability and how they see coming to the FLC affecting their lives. I divide

the learners into three groups according to their aims and position regarding

employment and give a summary of the learners' views along with mini case

studies of the learners. I discuss whether the FLC fills a particular gap in

providing opportunities for certain categories of learners not only to become

proficient in IT skills but also to build social and identity capital.

<u>The Learners</u>

The learners interviewed comprised twelve women and three men, all of whose

names have been changed for the purpose of anonymity and all of whom

received awards as learners of the year in the FLC. The interviewees

comprised the following people arranged in order of age at the time of their

interview: Emily (20), Bryony (32), Frank (37), Olivia (37), Jan (42), Grace (46),

Katherine (47), Mary (47), Alexis (50), Deirdre (51), Nancy (52), Louise (53),

Helen (53), Ian (56) and Charles (76).

The group had several networks in which they interacted with each other with

the exception of Bryony and Ian who only spoke to the tutors. All of them,

except Emily, fell outside the current focus of government action which targets the young for interventions to improve employability.

Overview of the Learners' Learning Journeys

As far as previous education was concerned, five had achieved HE level qualifications, four of them immediately after leaving school and one much later in life. These included an MA degree and part of a Masters (Helen), a B.Ed. degree in primary teaching (Jan), a Diploma in Clothing Design (Katherine), an HNC in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering (Charles) and an HNC in Social Sciences (Nancy). Four out of these five who had achieved an HE qualification had, as would be expected, left school with qualifications, the exception being Nancy who at a turning point in her life suddenly embarked on a whole raft of certificates. Another two had started HE courses but had dropped out. The courses which had been abandoned were a primary teachers' course (Louise) and HNC Computing (Olivia).

Of the remaining interviewees, Frank had obtained what he saw as disappointing Highers at school and had subsequently taken other Highers, while Ian had obtained O levels but gone no further. Finally there was a group of six women who had left school with no qualifications at all: Deirdre, Nancy, Emily, Bryony, Mary and Grace.

All the learners interviewed had been employed at some point in their lives before coming to the FLC. Several had completed work-based learning including Frank, who had worked in a bank, Louise and Grace who worked as civilian support workers for the police, Deirdre who worked for a department store and was later self-taught in accountancy while working for a voluntary organisation, Charles who had had management and other training and Nancy who had worked in insurance, but in most cases this learning was not transferable when looking for new employment. Apart from Emily, all had had many years with individual employers so it could be argued that they had been employable during these periods but all except Emily had missed out on learning the IT skills which are essential really to function at work and in other aspects of life in the 21st Century.

For Katherine and Alexis, their vocational skills were no longer relevant to the current labour market and their confidence had been eroded by years at home and other personal factors, while Louise, Grace and Frank had been made redundant with skills which were not transferable from their previous employment. Jan had a teaching qualification but lacked the IT skills which were now an essential part of the job while Deirdre had skills which had been self-taught in her previous employment but had no accreditation for them. Before her marriage, Bryony had worked in factory jobs she had not enjoyed and wanted new skills.

Health problems had affected Katherine, Mary, Ian and Nancy and caring responsibilities for children or parents had made working difficult at various times for Katherine, Alexis, Ian, Grace, Olivia and Helen.

Several of the group had had quite recent negative learning experiences which might be expected to affect their current dispositions to learning. Before coming to the FLC, 20-year-old Emily had dropped out of a Computing course and a Hairdressing course at Hollypark College, Grace had made an unsuccessful attempt to study ECDL at Northside College in a conventional class where most of the learners were teenagers, Katherine had started ECDL in a mainstream class in Hollypark College but had to leave when two classes merged and the times of the class were changed so that her childcare arrangements collapsed, while Mary had given up a typing class at Eastglen College where most of the class were young. Nancy had taken a whole raft of qualifications in later life but had dropped out of an HND Social Sciences at a university because of illness and difficulty in travelling in the evenings. One question which will be explored therefore is why the FLC seemed to work for these learners when mainstream courses had led to failure.

Despite the work records of these learners, at the time of interview and for a variety of reasons only two out of the whole group were actually employed. Obtaining employment was an objective for Alexis, Bryony, Emily, Frank, Grace, Helen, Katherine, Jan and Olivia. The two oldest men, Charles (76)

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who was retired and Ian (56) who had a chronic disability were not interested in seeking employment while Nancy and Louise were thinking about becoming self-employed. Another woman, Mary had left work because of an injury and was not fit to work.

Despite variations in their learning histories, it could be said that all who sought work faced some kind of obstacles so that the acquisition of skills alone was not sufficient to make employment likely. For the women there was a distinctly gendered aspect to the obstacles they faced with care of children, including in Katherine's case a child with a disability, tying them to the home or restricting their ability to work in some cases. However, Ian and Helen had also been carers for their own parents and this had impacted on their availability for employment and their ability to attend courses.

Categories of Learners

There were several possibilities in constructing categories to study the data provided by these 15 learners to aid an understanding of the FLC. I was looking at 15 very different life and work histories and to return to MacLure's metaphor, from this I hoped that I would be 'weaving something new yet assembled out of fragments and recollections of other fabrications' (MacLure 2003: 127). I was trying, as Stake puts it (1995: 102) to provide 'readers with good raw material for their own generalizing' but I needed to find some overall

patterns which might help to answer the research questions, especially the questions about employability, and provide assertions readers might like to test.

There were several possible categories including gender, class, age, previous educational history and having gone through life-changing experiences. I felt, however, that these were all factors which contributed to the development of the learners' dispositions to learning and could be discussed in this context but did not provide the answers to my question about why they came to the Centre. All were very relevant to try to understand these individuals but isolating any of them as over-riding categories did not work. I spent a considerable amount of time experimenting with different categories but finally, however, the goals of the learners in coming to the Centre and the identities which working towards these helped to create seemed to me of crucial importance.

This led me to construct the following three categories for the purpose of analysis.

Category A. Jobseekers. This group comprised learners who were all seeking employment as soon as possible and were receiving Jobseeker's Allowance. They therefore came to the FLC specifically to improve their chances of employment. All of this group were focused on obtaining work quickly and for them that was the purpose of their attendance. In these cases temporal flexibility was of great importance as the usual delays of waiting for a

conventional course to start were not suitable for them. Thus Frank explained, 'All the courses I did were a kind of means to an end and they definitely helped me get the job'. Bryony saw herself as attending until she got a job while Grace came because 'I need to get a full time job and I need to get one quick'. Helen came because 'I was absolutely desperate for a job' and without a computer at home she needed to practise her skills.

These learners were attending for a limited period of time as they looked for full time work and were under pressure for personal reasons and from the Department of Work and Pensions to find employment quickly. Study of this group raised issues about how our colleges respond to the need many learners have for temporal flexibility in their attendance and structural flexibility in their courses and demonstrated the importance of the FLC in offering alternative patterns of attendance to the traditional academic year and day. Using this category highlighted this crucially important role of the FLC.

Category B. Mothers moving towards work. This group consisted of middle class mothers who had spent years at home caring for children and were now taking the first steps towards working again. None was receiving benefits and there was not the same sense of urgency about finding work as in the first group. All were defined by family responsibilities and their identities were shifting from mothers and housewives to potential workers, moving out of the confines of the home, a world where conversations centred round children and

domestic matters. I was not aware before the interviews that this would be likely to be a significant group in the Centre but its existence opened up different questions about employability and confidence-building for those stay-at-home partnered parents who are not targeted by the government to go to work. All of these women were clearly capable of contributing to the economy by working but they were the very people for whom traditional courses were least likely to work because of their inflexibility. There were other interesting issues about employability in the case of those who had been employed previously but now found themselves in a fundamentally different labour market and again the failure of traditional programmes to provide flexibility for this group.

Their goals were more tentative. Thus, for example, Katherine, explained that coming to the Centre meant entering a kind of transitional space:

> It's given me if you like the easier option, the soft option. It's been if you like a middle ground from being totally at home to straight back out to work.

Jan was unsure about her future path and again felt it gave her time to decide if she wanted to return to teaching after a 13-year gap and also to gain confidence. She explained:

> I want to have a more serious look at what I have to do to go back to teaching… or… I also keep my options open. I'm not like, 'That's definitely what I want to do'. Just having a wider look around to see what else there is.

Alexis knew she would need to find a job once she was divorced but her immediate situation was so fluid that she could not have gone to a mainstream class and it took great effort to come to the Centre:

> Where was I going to go? I was in a situation where I can't afford to be out of the house for that length of time. The situation would become even more intolerable than it already is. Until the explosion comes I'm fitting in, I'm trying to make my life and my daughters' lives as pleasant as possible. Where was I going to go? This was really the only option for me and I thought I can do everything and if I have to leave quickly I can still keep that on at night time. I can keep it on a couple of nights a week.

This group represents a neglected group of learners who are not necessarily looking for financial support to return to work but flexibility in accommodating the unpredictable demands of children's health and lack of consistent childcare. If partners/husbands do not have conventional working patterns it is particularly difficult for these women to study but no allowance is made for this in conventional course patterns. Without the FLC, it is clear that none of this group would have gained any IT qualifications.

Category C. Learners not seeking employment. This small group included a pensioner and three people who had become unfit to work. Charles, the pensioner, had built coming to the Centre as a key part of his life in retirement and considering his reasons raised questions about learning in later life. Mary was suffering from chronic back pain and in a sense used the Centre to fill in time:

> I was at a bit of a loose end and I didnae know what to do with myself and I just bought a computer and I felt it was sitting there and I wisnae really doing much with it, you know, and I thought I'd love to know more.

Ian had used coming as an 'escape valve' from caring for his mother and had completed ECDL and Accounts courses. He was pessimistic about his future as his health was poor but hoped to come back to the Centre to do more courses. Deirdre had become redundant and also suffered from increasing disabilities. Analysis of this group raised interesting questions about lifelong learning and well-being and the general lack of interest of educational policy makers in people in this category. Examining this group gave an opportunity to reflect on future priorities for FLCs in a world of changing demographics and to interrogate the whole role of the FLC.

The categories were not completely discrete as some learners did not fit neatly into one particular category and I had difficulty in deciding, for example, if a mother who had stopped work briefly, but had come to the Centre to gain new skills for employment with the idea that she would attend until she had gained employment, should be in the same category as mothers who had been at home for many years and were taking the first tentative pre-work steps. Eventually I decided she had a clear identity as a jobseeker in its technical sense and her story had more to tell me about the Centre's role in fostering employability for job-seekers than considering her in her role as a mother. The narratives of each of the learners will now be considered within the framework of these categories.

Jobseekers: Narratives

I decided to categorise as Jobseekers, learners who fulfilled the official government definition of Jobseekers, i.e. those who are able to work, available for work and actively looking for work (UK Government 2009). All of them had been out of the labour market for a time ranging from nine months to two years. Perhaps surprisingly only 5 of the 15 learners fell into this category. These learners, therefore, were looking to improve their employability but in every case lack of confidence was a major issue. Frank, Grace and Louise had to come to terms with redundancy after between 10 and 27 years in employment in their respective organisations while Helen and Bryony were trying to re-enter employment after Helen had been caring for her mother and Bryony for her baby.

The habituses of this group were very varied but for all of them coming to the FLC was a kind of transitional space after the start of their job search and before finding a job. This transitional space could expand or contract according to the circumstances of the learner and they knew that if they obtained a job while courses were unfinished at the FLC they could still come back in the evening. This group of job seekers further divided into two sub groups – a group who had been made redundant and two other learners who were not currently employed for other reasons.

For Grace, Frank and Louise maintaining routine after the collapse of the structure of a working routine, feeling part of a learning culture which is not dominated by the young and regaining confidence, were particularly significant factors.

Case Study 1: Grace

Of all the learners interviewed, Grace was the one with the most negative dispositions to learning which could be traced back to the wounding learning experiences she experienced at secondary school. Hammond and Feinstein (2006: 31) have shown those who fail to flourish at school are much less likely to have participated in adult learning between the ages of 33 and 42 and Grace in fact had no engagement with post-school formal learning until she was made redundant at 46. Grace's narrative was one of struggle and striving to cope with circumstances beyond her control and having to find a way forward after the final blow of redundancy. This redundancy came after 17 years employment and for Grace this experience was very traumatic. With this background, Grace's chances of achieving any kind of formal learning success might well seem remote. However, despite all this, Grace had passed ECDL at the FLC and had very positive comments to make. She said:

> And I would advise anyone to come here. I said that on the day of the awards. I think it's a great place to come. It's a lovely atmosphere.

Unpicking the reasons why this mode of learning worked for Grace while school did not, reveals several factors which other interviewees also alluded to and it is

necessary to contextualise these in examining her learning biography. The identity which Grace constructed in her narrative of her school days was one of victim, ignored by the teachers and bullied by her peers. Separated, because Grace was deemed less academic, from the girl who had been her friend throughout her primary school, Grace felt the teachers had no time for her as part of a class designated 'less able'. She came from a working class home where her mother worked as a cleaner and academic achievement was not particularly prized. Her failure to achieve at school perhaps reflects general patterns of working class relationships with education which Reay has identified thus:

> Regardless of what individual working-class males and females are able to negotiate and achieve for themselves within the educational field, the collective patterns of working-class trajectories within education remain sharply different from those of the middle classes, despite over a 100 years of universal state education (Reay 2001: 334).

Grace's placement in a class for whom the teachers had low expectations meant that Grace had virtually no chance of academic success and she and her friend took completely different paths. This effect of streaming in exacerbating lack of achievement has been documented by research in Scotland, the United States and Israel quoted by Gamoran (2005: 2). Hallam (2005: 14) has suggested, quoting Weiner (1986) that:

> If failure is attributed to something which is unstable, e.g. bad luck, which may not occur in the future, expectations about future performance are likely to be unaffected. However, if failure is attributed to a stable factor, i.e. lack of ability, there will be an expectation of continued failure.

As well as receiving little encouragement in the secondary, Grace lacked social capital as her older siblings had left school and she had lost her friend. She

became the target of an extortion racket run by a group of girls who came from what she described as a 'rougher' area than her own district. This group lurked in the school toilets and demanded money with the result that Grace ran home at lunch times rather than use the toilets. This of course further cut her off from making any kind of bonds with other pupils and eventually she started playing truant and stopped attending school altogether. Grace attributed this lack of success at school to the bullying factor which was clearly an unstable factor but did not challenge the judgement of herself as less able, which may be one of the reasons why she undertook no further formal learning after school.

When she left school Grace immediately found herself unemployed and resented the fact that there were jobs for boys in the local shipyard whereas her gender excluded her from these. She finally obtained a post in a surveyor's office which lasted for three years before she was made redundant. After this Grace had a series of temporary office jobs before obtaining what she thought was a job for life as a civilian support worker with the police. However, her department was closed down and Grace became redundant after 17 years with the police. This was clearly a traumatic experience for Grace and the dominant tone in her account of what happened is one of anger, sometimes spoken as if she were speaking to the police directly:

> We put up with a lot of training – all the training that you gave us and we can't work elsewhere now because all we did was check criminal records and cards and that's no use to you other than in a police environment.

Finding her skills non-transferable, Grace had attempted mainstream learning to gain ECDL prior to coming to the FLC. She did this not because she wanted to but because she thought it was necessary for employment but found herself lost in a class of 30, most of whom were teenagers. Grace found the teenagers disruptive and said they were 'only interested in going on the Internet and carrying on'. She felt the lecturer did not help her and felt insecure on her own:

> I know at Northside College I felt totally out my depth. I didn't know anybody there, I thought, I'm no' enjoying this, I thought if I had somebody come with me but Louise (Grace's friend who later persuaded her to come to the FLC) always worked full time at the police so I'd nobody to come with me.

Grace left the course, feeling herself unable to cope, and therefore added to her negative school experience a negative college experience. Both were experiences of isolation, of failing to bond with other learners and of feeling alienated from the teachers. She was at a turning point in her life after redundancy when she came to the FLC and was facing all the problems associated with the loss of her work identity and loss of income. She felt forced to learn although, as she explained, she was not 'really into computers but I know that's the way of the world and you've really got to get on with it'. It was her friend Louise who finally persuaded her to go with her to the FLC and this encouraged her to continue. Grace did not find learning at the FLC easy, indeed Louise said that Grace was often struggling, but she succeeded in passing the seven modules of ECDL and hence gaining a qualification she could present to potential employers.

As well as the presence of her friend there were other features of the learning culture which helped Grace to continue at the FLC and to change her disposition towards learning, if perhaps only in the context of that specific learning culture. Four main factors can be identified. The first factor which attracted Grace was the very basic one that the FLC was clearly different from both school and the other college she had attended in that most of the people attending were older and were not treated as children:

> I looked at the age group of the people who were learning there and I liked that they were older. I looked at how Yusef was walking about and they would call him over when they required help and I could hear how they were speaking to him and they weren't speaking to him as if they were children in a class. I just thought, me, I'd like to come here. So we signed up right away.

Being able to learn with other older people seemed to be a very crucial factor for all the mature learners interviewed.

A second factor was that Grace felt going to the FLC gave structure to her life for four days a week. Going from the world of work to a life where the only fixed point is the fortnightly signing on at the Jobcentre created a huge void for Grace. Grace explained that:

> For a start it gives me somewhere to go, somewhere to get up for in the morning instead of just hanging about the house.

Her only regret was that she could not attend more often. The flexibility of the FLC which enables people in Grace's situation to create an instant structure after the shock of redundancy seemed to be one of the most important factors which helped her learning. She explained her situation:

We usually do four times a week, Monday to Thursday. I'm limited because I get unemployment benefit. You're not allowed to do more than fifteen and a half hours a week, I believe. And it's ridiculous because when you go up every fortnight to sign on they say, 'How's your job search going?' So they're hounding you to get a job but they're limiting you as to how many hours you're learning.

The third factor which assisted Grace in altering her disposition towards learning was the atmosphere of the FLC which Grace described by an adjective which several of the other learners used. This adjective was 'calming' and there was a strong sense that Grace's life was in turmoil at the time she came to the FLC. The physical ambience of the FLC appealed to her, the quietness and the space in the layout and she also mentioned liking to see the plants cultivated by the tutors. Grace was clearly in a state of great tension and anger, at one point using the very forceful Scottish word 'scunnered', which means sickened and disgusted, to describe how she felt about her life. However, as well as the physical calming effect of the FLC, the approach of the tutors she felt contributed to her sense of mental well-being. She described their patience, how well they explained points to her and finally mentioned 'You can have a wee laugh with them'. Grace's narrative gives the sense that laughter had become something rare in her life and here the tutor's role is almost a therapeutic one.

The fourth factor which affected Grace's disposition to learning in the FLC was the social capital aspect of attending. It was important for Grace that she had made friends with other learners, all of whom she referred to as 'girls' and to an extent this new female social network helped to compensate a little for the loss

of the social network she had been part of when she was at work. She had also formed close ties with the administrator who had phoned her when she did not come in and to whom she had confided the personal reasons why she had not attended. She saw this as extra support and was very appreciative of it. It seemed that coming to the FLC then and being part of its learning culture overcame the negative dispositions to learning which had prevented Grace from flourishing at school or in the other college. Initially considering herself unemployable, it helped her to gain an employer-recognised qualification, ECDL, and for the first time in her life to achieve some formal learning. As she put it, coming to the FLC, although it involved a journey across the city, was something she really enjoyed because 'It's like a wee escape route from everything else.'

Grace also valued being one of the Learners of the Year awardees because the certificate was tangible proof to her family that she was actually doing something and not just 'going round the shops'. Here it gave her a sense of agency and demonstrated to her relatives that she was not just wasting her time. In addition she saw going to the FLC as giving her cultural capital, something to talk about at interviews to potential employers, while obtaining the ECDL at the centre represented the first formal accreditation from an external awarding body which Grace had ever achieved. In a narrative of helplessness and lack of agency, coming to the FLC gave some sense of agency and some hope to Grace for the future. Wojecki, in discussing adult identities in the workplace postulates a concept of designated identities which could be applied

not only to workers but to learners like Grace. His definition of designated identities is as follows:

> Designated identities are the identity stories one tells in the future tense. These are stories about what a worker expects or is achievable for them (Wojecki 2007: 173).

Despite her narrative constructing herself as victim, Grace used the future tense at one point in her narrative when she said of the FLC, 'I feel I'm learning and hopefully I'll get a full time job one day'. Here Grace had a designated identity of herself as once more a worker rather than a client of the benefits system, something she strongly rejected by disassociating herself from the other clients whom she saw when she attended the Jobcentre:

> And I hate going up there because, God forgive me there's so many undesirables up there. They're coming up and they're junkies or they're drunk. I just hate it. But you need the money so you just have to go and sign for it – you've got tae go.

There was no indication that Grace had any interest in undertaking any other kind of formal learning elsewhere as she simply saw coming to the FLC as making her more employable. In view of her narrative of survival against the odds, obtaining any qualification was really a great achievement. Grace's habitus and all the complex factors which contributed to this stacked the odds against Grace succeeding and yet the FLC for her was a very positive experience.

Grace's case illustrates the need for training for those whose skills are job specific and specialised and the need for offering this quickly after redundancy. It also illustrates that conventional classes which may seem to replicate

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wounding learning experiences at school are unlikely to work for people in Grace's position.

Case Study 2: Louise

Louise and Frank had also been made redundant but their narratives constructed quite different views of redundancy from Grace. Grace would have continued in her job for another 15 years until retiral if she had had the opportunity but both Frank and Louise seemed almost glad to leave their jobs. Louise had been 27 years as a police civilian support worker but her habitus was very different from Grace's. She had left school with Highers, although she had not been as successful as she thought she could have been, and had been accepted for a teacher training course. However, she did not take up the offer and worked in an insurance office for two years before finally beginning teacher training. After one year she had left the course as it was not what she wanted to do and had gone to France to pick grapes and later to work as an au pair. She then took the job as a police support worker and, perhaps surprisingly, did not leave until she was made redundant 27 years later. Louise explained why she had remained for so long in this post, identifying job satisfaction, habit and possibly social capital as factors:

> And the job itself was interesting and there was a big staff. So there was variety in the job and there wasn't a lot of turnover and so there was a core of people who had been there as long as I was in the job and longer - there was that core element. But you get used to it… it's just… it's habit, it's an income and you've got bills to pay and because you know the job so well it's comfortable.

Louise seems to have been in a comfort zone at work and during this period undertook evening classes at Hollypark College, doing what she described as 'wee bits and pieces' of learning, along with a sailing course which she did not complete at another college. Louise found her shift patterns made it difficult to commit to any formal learning and when she was offered redundancy felt she was at a turning point in her life which offered her opportunity:

> I worked for them for 27 years but it wasn't… I wanted to leave, I really wanted to leave and when the opportunity came up – it never came up before – in the police force, you know this opportunity to take redundancy/retirement because of my age I was able to get a retirement pension. So I just… I really wanted it so when I got it I was so pleased.

Louise looked on redundancy as an opportunity to complete learning she had started and not finished in the past including languages and the sailing course and was also about to start a course on the knowledge needed for taxi drivers. However, it is significant that in the immediate aftermath of redundancy she came to the FLC like Grace four days a week. Like Grace she felt that she needed ECDL if she wished to be employed and that her previous skills were no longer of use. She therefore also used the routine of attending to create structure in her life and like Grace she liked the atmosphere, identifying the fact that it was 'very calm, very quiet' compared to what Grace had told her of her experiences with young people at Northside College. This she described as a 'horror story'.

Louise also felt that it was coming to the FLC which had widened her horizons to undertake other learning because it had shown that she was

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…able to learn something new after so many years of not learning things. It's brought my confidence up really. And it's made me think: it's made me broaden my horizons in other ways, because I want to do other things.

At the time of the interview Louise was thinking of being a self-employed taxi driver, quite an unusual occupation for a woman in her fifties in Glasgow, partly because she feared working in an office where she would be subordinate to young people:

> The taxiing is another string to my bow, something to fall back on, but having said that, it does appeal to me to be self-employed because I have this image of myself going back to work in an office and some little 19-year-old telling me what to do, when to go for my tea and I don't know if I could actually do that. Maybe I'll have to swallow my pride and go along with it for the sake of finances.

Louise's identity as a mature independent adult seemed to her to be at risk if she took an office job and it could be argued that obtaining her ECDL in the company of other adults in the FLC had helped to maintain that adult identity and also opened up other pathways. Her story therefore seems to corroborate the importance of the FLC as an adult learning space where adults can be secure in their adult identities.

Case Study 3: Frank

Frank's redundancy had not been unexpected but unlike Louise he had actively disliked his job. He explained:

> I didn't know for sure but I was just hanging on in there for the redundancy… I didn't particularly like the job. I didn't like the working environment. I've got a few very good friends from there but apart from that it was a very sort of cliquey, back-stabbing environment. It had

been not the nicest place to work in and it was a very stressful place as well. Even just your normal day to day work was really intense.

Frank had achieved two Highers at school but felt he could have achieved better grades and more passes as at this period his life had fallen apart with the death of his mother after years of suffering from Multiple Sclerosis. On leaving school he had a series of low paid temporary jobs before working for almost ten years in a bank headquarters. Frank had very positive dispositions towards learning, describing himself as having a 'thirst for learning'. Since leaving school he had taken four additional Highers in evening classes although he had no intention of moving on to HE. This reflects one of Biesta's Learning Lives (2008) findings that most people do not take qualifications beyond their previous levels and it almost seemed as if he was putting right what he saw as a failure to do what he was capable of in his youth. Frank had also taken leisure classes in guitar playing and other subjects and had completed a diploma in the more esoteric field of Astrology via a correspondence course. Frank described learning as an 'addiction' and said he always had to learn something new.

Yet although he had not liked his job, being unemployed was difficult for Frank. Coming to the FLC for Frank fulfilled a similar purpose in providing structure in his life in the eight and a half months he spent after he was made redundant looking for work, as it did for Grace and Louise. He rated the importance of the FLC in this period in his life very strongly stating:

Well, I'll be honest, some weeks I was in almost every day and I think that's the thing that kept me sane, Evelyn, for not only was it a means to an end but it also meant that although I wasn't working I had a regular routine over there.

As well as having benefits for his mental health, the FLC gave him an

opportunity to develop marketable skills as, like Grace and Louise, his previous

employment developed skills which were not transferable and although he had

used a computer he felt he lacked basic computer skills. He explained that this

was because of the specialised nature of his work in the bank:

I always wanted to learn more about the computers because although I'd worked with computers in the bank for years I was only keying in financial transactions – it was only the numerical side of the keyboard I was using. I couldn't really use, you know, the actual alphabet.

Coming to the FLC for Frank then was purely aimed at improving his

qualifications for an employer whereas his other learning was more for his own

satisfaction and for reasons which seemed to be connected with his life history.

He did a beginners' course and learning to touch type 'with the prospect of that

enhancing my career prospects' and said that everything he did at the FLC was

'a means to an end'. He mentioned the same kind of positive aspects of the

FLC as Grace: the relaxed atmosphere, the helpfulness of the tutors and the

fact that he looked on the tutors as friends rather than teachers:

I feel it's got a very laid back feel to it. It's an open plan environment, very laid back feel. Jim and Yusef do a great job: they're so helpful, everybody's so helpful as well, so professional in what they do. I really do think the staff over there are a credit to the College. I really do, beyond a doubt and I'm not just saying that because I'm friends with them now. I genuinely feel that.

Frank was younger than Grace and Louise but he still saw the FLC as a place

for mature learners where they could start at the beginning and learn without

being alongside teenagers who from his perspective were

> …so knowledgeable about computers in a way that we weren't when we were growing up at school – it just wasn't the same. I think kids now are just like computer prodigies.

Research carried out by Arulampalam et al (2001: 577) claims that

unemployment has scarring effects because

> …job termination incurs the permanent loss of firm-specific human capital, while an unemployment spell not only precludes the accumulation of work experience but may also bring the deterioration of general skills.

In a small way the learning culture of the FLC is uniquely placed to build social

capital, improve IT skills and provide a space particularly congenial to mature

learners which can provide some defence against the scarring which

redundancy may inflict. In Frank's case he moved from attending the FLC into

a temporary and then a permanent job in Hollypark College itself.

Case Study 4: Helen

Helen, who had only come to Scotland with her English family when she

entered secondary school, had a narrative of being an outsider at school,

struggling to understand at first what her classmates said and feeling constantly

terrified that she would be hit by the belt. Helen had obtained Highers and

gone to university at a time when only a small elite percentage of school

leavers went to university but seemed dismissive of the MA degree she

obtained, describing it as

> …a bit of a jumble. It was a pass degree, you know. I accumulated it. It was an Arts degree, a bit of Languages, Philosophy, Sociology.

Helen had continued to undertake learning after leaving university:

> …lots of different things, evening classes and stuff. Those were all things of personal interest rather than for a career or exams or anything like that. I did half of a proper MA so to speak, the Glasgow one being a BA really, but that was when I was much older in my forties, late forties, but unfortunately I wasn't able to complete it because of personal responsibilities.

These personal responsibilities were the care of her elderly parents and as an

unmarried daughter Helen had given up her career in England as a university

administrator and had come home to look after them. She therefore had spent

several years as a carer doing only short term jobs and had a gap since she

had last worked. The death of her mother meant that she was now looking for

permanent work, a situation which closely matches Biesta's (2008: 9) definition

of events which are 'major life-changing turning points' which 'often involve a

need to learn something'. Like those who were made redundant, Helen was

looking for skills which would be attractive to an employer and had in fact

already obtained ECDL before she came to the FLC.

For Helen, the FLC played an important role at a point in her life when she was

beginning to despair of finding work and rather than helping her to obtain

specific qualifications enabled her to upgrade her IT skills in general and also,

as in the cases of Grace, Louise and Frank, gave her a purpose and structure

in her life. She explained:

> Oh, it cheered me up immensely. It really did. I was pretty low at the time. I was getting pretty depressed and thinking, 'Gosh, am I ever going to get a proper job again?' And you know just the fact of… I think I did pretty much come every day for a while or at least most days and you know that in itself is a terrific help when you're out of work that you're getting up and going somewhere, doing something that's a bit like work even if I couldn't work full time hours there.

Helen was the highest achiever in academic terms of the interviewees but she

was very conscious of being older and her confidence had been eroded by

failing to find work:

> It was very, very difficult to get another job, for when you've been out of the job market for a bit and it doesn't matter what you've been doing, if you're not in the first flush of youth nobody wants to employ you.

When she came to the FLC Helen described herself as

> …absolutely desperate for a job. Because I'd been, because I'd come back to Scotland to look after my parents – my mother was still living at that point and I had…I'd been doing fairly low level jobs, short term contracts, things where I didn't have to travel, where I could be nearby, be available for her and one particular contract came to an end and I was really quite shocked.

Like Grace, Helen found engagement with the benefits system stressful and

unhelpful and also commented on the rules which restricted the number of

hours she could study:

> I wanted to come in more than I was officially allowed to come in by the rules of the benefits office. You're trying so hard to do everything you possibly can to get a job and they say, 'Yes but you can only do courses for a certain number of hours a week'. These Jobcentres, they're absurd regulations but not just the regulations. I felt the people weren't actually making any effort to help me. Maybe they thought I didn't need help.

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Eventually Helen discovered that she could come for additional hours in the evening and so circumvented the rules but the desire to come as much as possible in a kind of replication of going to work to fill up the empty week and learn as much as possible, which was evident in her case and in the cases of Grace and Frank, is actually prevented by the benefits system. Helen did not attribute coming to the FLC as enabling her directly to gain employment but identified the boost to her confidence that enabled her to undertake further training and assist indirectly in finally obtaining a job:

> I thought the staff were just so nice and so encouraging and certainly the fact that I was able to practise my skills, revise them and that improved my confidence as well. It didn't lead directly to getting another job but I think I felt much more confident about doing even the training for work thing which I got at Strathclyde because I had you know, recently been bashing away at a computer at different programmes.

Schuller et al (2002: 15) in discussing confidence as a benefit of learning, point out that as well as confidence being mentioned as a positive outcome of education by those who had not succeeded before

> …even those who had already achieved much can still have their confidence further boosted, to very positive effect.

For Helen, therefore, the FLC provided a physical place to go in a period of lack of hope when she was having to adjust to no longer having the identity of a daughter who was the carer for her mother, had lost her professional working identity and now was thrown into the unwelcome role of jobseeker.

<u>Case Study 5: Bryony</u>

Bryony, like Helen was strongly motivated to find work but her lack of IT skills and the fact that she had only worked in factories, meant that she had to start from the beginning as far as the skills she wanted were concerned. Bryony accepted that she might have been responsible for not doing well at school because 'I messed about a lot actually so I never got great qualifications' but there were three factors which made attending a mainstream IT skills class difficult for her.

The first factor was her domestic circumstances as a mother with a baby because as her husband worked away from home a lot she could not go to evening classes and during the day the times when her relatives could baby-sit for her were limited by their own part-time jobs. Here being able to choose her days and times at the FLC was crucially important for her and also being able to change them according to changing circumstances.

Secondly Bryony's secondary school experiences had left her lacking the confidence to participate in a mainstream class. She explained:

> I don't like sitting in a class full of people where everybody looks like they
> know what they're doing. I think you've got tae have the confidence.
> The whole thing – it's something you've never done in your life before
> and the mair relaxed it is obviously, the better.

Bryony's point about trying to learn IT skills being something completely new for her is a very pertinent one. I suggest that learning these skills has special difficulties for those who did not do so at school because of their perceived

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difficulty and an underlying discourse of technophobia. Jim had mentioned that

several learners had a fear of touching computers which Bryony described in

this way:

> And when Ian got a computer and put it in the house you're quite scared
> of them. You know, you're thinking, 'I'm gonnae break this.' You press
> a button and things keep changing on the screen and things.

In addition to this fear of the computer, Bryony had a fear of teachers which

clearly stemmed from her schooldays. She mentioned being afraid to ask for

help at school:

> When you're at school you're afraid to ask questions in case it's not the
> right thing. You're scared to say anything in case it's no' the right thing.

By contrast Bryony felt the tutors were approachable and could give her as

much or as little help as she determined she needed.

The third reason Bryony did not want to attend a mainstream course was

because these courses are time-barred, ending at a prescribed time, but

Bryony wanted to attend the FLC for as long as it took to find a job. This meant

she could proceed to other courses in a kind of continuum of learning after she

finished ECDL. Bryony saw coming to the FLC as exercising agency rather

than waiting for a job to come to her and she had developed an enjoyment in

the learning itself. The curriculum offered, which enabled her to attain mastery

of different IT packages at different levels, meant that she could use her time in

the FLC in a positive way rather than simply passing her time and failing to

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progress. She also felt that she was already 'out' of the confines of her domestic situation:

> You're no just sitting about waiting for something to come to you. You're out and you're trying. And my aim is eventually to get a job but in the meantime I won't stop coming to college until I get a job. I'll just see where it leads and what the next thing is. It's like, when you finish one thing, you go, 'Oh this is quite interesting' and you kind of go on from there. And in the meantime you're discovering new things that you never even knew were there or things which you never even knew you would enjoy.

Bryony therefore, despite her previous negative dispositions to learning at school, like Grace achieved her first formal qualifications at the FLC. As in the case of Grace her goal was a purely practical one – to become employable by gaining proof that she had the IT skills employers wanted. Since the interview, she did in fact gain employment.

Mothers Contemplating Working: Narratives

This group consisted of four mothers who had not been employed for several years as they had been at home looking after their families. Their position was different from the Jobseekers as none was receiving unemployment benefits and apart from Katherine, who had gained a part-time job by the time of the interview, none was seeking work with the urgency of the Jobseekers group. All these women had a middle class habitus and three of them lived in affluent suburbs but all had benefited from individual learning accounts because they personally did not have an income. All had been supported by their husbands' salaries while they were at home and there was a sense that they were not

seeking work for economic reasons so much as for their personal reasons. As

Katherine put it:

> The whole point of me going back to work is if you like for my sanity, for
> Stuart works his cotton socks off and we've always worked that way that
> his salary will cover everything and therefore if my job disrupts family life
> too much it defeats the purpose.

Women in this situation are not targeted by the government to encourage them

to work or to undertake training although they may have potentially at least 15

or more years they could work and contribute to the economy. Turgoose et al

(2006: 18) surveyed 280 women returning to work and found that:

> Much of the focus of support for women returning to work after caring
> responsibilities focuses on lone parents. This is an active process on
> behalf of government aimed at increasing their participation in work and
> to decrease their dependence on benefits. There is limited support of
> this nature directed at partnered women because they rarely claim
> benefits themselves.

This survey also found that the elements women with families may look for in

coming back to work include part-time working, and patterns of hours that fit in

with a partner's hours to provide consistent family care and flexible working

(Turgoose et al 2006: 16). When looking to update their skills before they are

at a stage actually to apply for jobs, it is clear that women returners need

learning provision which should be able to offer them the same kind of

flexibility. For the four women in this group the flexibility of the FLC and how

this accommodated their families was one of their main reasons for attendance,

indeed Katherine had had to leave a mainstream class because it could not

offer her this flexibility.

Alexis had been a secretary proficient with a typewriter but her skills were obsolete in the computer age after 20 years at home, Katherine had been successful and skilled in a Scottish clothing industry which had collapsed since she had last worked, Jan had been a primary teacher but faced a jobs market where she was out of date and in competition with a glut of young primary teachers. Only Olivia who had worked in offices and was looking for a part-time office job was actually going back to the same kind of work she had done before.

These women had been able to afford to stay at home and look after their children, which was not an option available to the other two mothers interviewed, Deirdre and Nancy, and had a segment of their lives in front of them where their former qualifications were either redundant or obsolete. Alexis was the only one who was in the position of perceiving a necessity to find a job as for the other three it was more about personal fulfilment than financial necessity. The FLC had not consciously targeted this group but strong bonds in their community through churches, schools and organisations in which they participated like the Scouts meant that for Katherine and Jan there was a network of middle class mothers which flagged up the FLC to them, although ironically for Katherine initially the information she received from this network put her off attending the FLC. Initiatives in the past to attract mothers returning to education and looking for work have all centred on discrete courses. It was clear in fact from the interviews that they did not necessarily

want to talk only to other mothers or indeed to talk only to other women. Alexis, for example, related conversations she had had with various male learners, all of whom had failed at mainstream classes.

This entire small group except Olivia therefore came to the FLC to acquire IT skills for the first time and I would argue that the learning culture facilitated this in a way which mainstream classes cannot do so easily. They all had limited ambitions for employment in the immediate future at the time of interview but acquiring IT skills gave them a much stronger position in trying to create a future for themselves.

This group contrasted with the Jobseekers group in one way as they did not come to the FLC to provide structure in lives which had been suddenly disrupted. However, a common factor linking the experience of the two groups is their perception of learning in the FLC providing a strong support factor in times of crisis. This was very obvious in the cases of Alexis and Katherine and confidence building was important for everyone except the youngest, Olivia where there may have been cultural differences and some language barriers in exploring her reasons for attendance.

All of this group had positive dispositions to learning and three of the four had studied at HE level yet there seemed to be cogent reasons why mainstream

education in IT skills might have been as unsuccessful for them as it had been

for Grace. Exploring the learning stories will help to unpack these reasons.

Case Study 6: Alexis

Alexis at 50 was the oldest of this group and had come to the FLC at a crisis

point in her life. After 20 years at home, her marriage had broken down and

she was in the middle of an acrimonious divorce. Her identity as a wife was

therefore disintegrating and she felt an imperative to look for work but was not

mentally ready to go into the workplace. Alexis had been a secretary and said

she had been a good secretary but felt disadvantaged because computers had

taken over from typewriters and she had been left behind:

> And because my confidence is at an all-time low and everybody seems
> to have all this computer jargon and people think because you're in the
> house all you can discuss is curtains and the price of food or washing-up
> liquid, the thought of going into a class every day just filled me with
> absolute horror.

Like Louise, she was particularly afraid of working with young people,

explaining:

> I need to get a job. That's the bottom line but I don't want to be sacked
> after the first week because I screwed something up, I lost something or
> because I'm working with young girls. Because I have young girls I
> realise they don't give you any time to explain to you how things are
> done so I'm going to have to go in armed and that's just the bottom line.

Like Grace, Alexis found herself in a situation where she had to learn but did

not particularly want to and gaining IT skills Alexis saw as providing her with the

'arms' to defend herself in a new work situation. However she could not face

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being in a conventional class. IT skills are really acquired individually so that

the conventional class Alexis postulates where progress is assumed to be at

the one pace can be very stressful and demotivating for those who fall behind.

In the FLC, however, Alexis could progress at her own pace.

Alexis, like Grace, constructed a victim narrative, describing herself as

'wrecked' and her husband as using 'all the powers of Hell to come after me'.

She spoke of being rejected in her life in general and being perceived as

looking stupid. Learning at the FLC, however, enabled her to begin to rebuild

her self-efficacy:

> I began to speak to people there and realised I hadn't really spoken to
> adults in a very long time. You know I'd been in an environment where I
> hadn't actually spoken to adults. I found myself getting pretty confident
> so much so that I was at a friend's not long ago and I said, 'Oh that. You
> don't want to do that. You want to drop and drag.' And I thought 'Oh my
> God. I'm telling them. And they go, 'You!' And I think, 'Yes. ME.' That
> might be a small leap for someone else but it's a giant leap for me.
> Because they're actually looking at me with a degree of respect or
> thinking, 'She's not as stupid as she actually looks' and that's worth its
> weight in gold.

Alexis several times drew a distinction between her normal domestic life in the

'prison' of the home and how learning new IT skills had enabled her to move

beyond these confines. She contrasted the domestic preoccupations which

usually circumscribed her life and the new ideas and challenges which she was

undertaking:

> Normally it's, 'I'll get that washing done and just go and see if my
> mother's alright' and now I lie in bed thinking, 'I can do that and that and
> alright… Yeah. Great.'

This was despite the fact that Alexis had a low perception of her own ability and hinted that she might be dyslexic:

> I am so slow at picking things up it's just not true, for example I took my daughter with problems to a man who was very well known in dyslexia circles and we went for months and months to him and he said, 'I don't know about your daughter but by God you need help.' I have to read a thing and read a thing until eventually the penny drops. So I don't need to waste time in there. I can take it home and I can go over it again in my usual fashion and go over it again and highlight it.

Her self-esteem was clearly very low yet coming to the FLC widened what Hodkinson (1998: 97) has referred to as 'horizons for action'. Building on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, he argues that 'the dispositions of habitus and the positions of education and the labour market both influence horizons for action and are inter-related'. Alexis initially saw her horizon as limited by her age and what she perceived as her lack of ability but she related a story of the tutor reacting to this perception:

> It's helped me so much and it's helped me in confidence too. You know I had a talk with Yusef about it and I said, 'I'm really concerned about my age,' and he said, 'But your children are grown up now; they're not really coming in after wild parties and things like that. You're at a stage where you're reliable and they want to employ women of your age more and more and we believe you can do it.' Now I'm not here for anybody at home and I believe I can do it.

Again and again throughout the interview Alexis stressed how coming to the FLC had helped her confidence and explained how helpful she found the tutors in this respect. Alexis had a great admiration for the tutors whom she saw as being able to answer any question and also as being enthusiasts for their subject. She also expressed the thought that they were not laughing at her, almost as if this is what she expected teachers to do:

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Some people although they can pass their exams should not be allowed to be teachers because they can't convey that and they don't have that empathy and that love. They love this subject so much that they want them to have the same passion. You've got that down there. You've got the enthusiasm about it and it's the willingness to share this knowledge and I like this very much too. They want to give it to you. I'm secure in the knowledge that whatever I ask them they will be able to answer that as well. And they're not laughing at me. That's very important too.

Alexis was clearly a very fragile learner and in fact when the divorce reached a more stressful stage she gave up attending the FLC for several months. However, there is no problem about resuming study at the FLC after a gap and this is what in fact happened. At the time of writing she had successfully passed several ECDL modules, the divorce was concluded and, although she was not yet working, in the domain of learning IT skills what Hallam refers to as a 'positive possible self' (Hallam 2005: 19) was clearly developing.

Case Study 7: Katherine

Like Alexis, Katherine had also come to the FLC at a turning point in her life. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer and had undergone a successful course of treatment but felt that she needed to re-assess her life:

> But very personally I had breast cancer and you just… I got through that and I was the luckiest person on earth because every result I got was a good result. You know of two results I always got the better.
> So it was all taken away, you know. We got it early and we got it removed. It was super. It just makes you think… you know, go out and get life. Make the most of it.

Although she played an active part in civic life through such typically middle class activities as taking a junior section of the Scouts and acting as a parent volunteer at her children's primary school, she had entered what she called a

'mid-life crisis' and saw the need for getting a job as something to preserve her 'sanity'.

Katherine had had a very successful career in the clothing industry before her two children were born, qualifying at a textiles college after a four year diploma course which she attended with three girls who had been at her school. However, Katherine had found that her job was not compatible with her life as a new mother and had to give up work:

> But the sad thing about that time, 15 or 16 years ago, the clothing industry was the rag trade and they weren't open to job sharing or… and things like, you know, I had to produce samples and if you had to stay in the factory to nine o'clock to produce that sample then you stayed in the factory till 9 o'clock, so it doesn't really fit in with bringing up a young family.

In the period since then all the companies who employed her had closed down as the Scottish clothing industry lost out to global competitors in countries where lower wages could be paid with the result that Katherine had no possibility of resuming her former career. Katherine had also caring responsibilities for one of her two sons who had a rare genetic disorder and she could not contemplate full time work.

Katherine had obtained Highers at school and had very positive dispositions to learning and realised she needed to acquire IT skills before she looked for work. However, after 16 years at home this was challenging and she felt her 'confidence had taken a few knocks'. At first she opted for a mainstream ECDL

class, because she knew another mother who had gone to the FLC but dropped out because she was not 'disciplined' enough to work on her own and Katherine thought she might be in the same position. Unfortunately this morning class was closed and merged with another class in the afternoon because of falling numbers and Katherine could not attend in the afternoon because of having to be there for her son. At this point she decided to go to the FLC with her friend Jan because it offered her the flexibility to fit in with her commitments at home.

Katherine then was someone with highly specialised skills which had become irrelevant to the Scottish economy who had come through a life-threatening experience and needed new skills to become employable. She noticed a difference between the FLC and the mainstream class which she identified as the FLC being a community:

> Everyone works so hard to make it a community down there. And it sometimes seems a bit clichéd but it's not and I think that factor brings you back and although the people in the Business School were nice it wasn't the same. There wasn't the same pull.

Like Alexis, Katherine was very conscious of her age and of being at a disadvantage compared with younger people. Again she had a perception of college as being full of younger people:

> Because you know, a woman of mid-forties, you know you can still be… you know new experiences in life can be a bit daunting at times. I think when you're returning you're a bit older, you're conscious that the place is full of younger people and you know you're trying to keep your end up for the older age group, you know, and do it right.

For Katherine, coming to the FLC gave her a kind of space before looking for work which was very important to her as she did not know what kind of work she could do. Like Alexis it gave her the opportunity to construct another identity as an IT learner and to move outside her usual identity as a mum who spent her time talking to other mums in conversations about children. Again, like Alexis the key gain for Katherine was acquiring confidence and moving out of the restricted world of the home:

> Just kind of confidence building. Getting me back on the out to work track but I didn't know what job I was going to do and therefore I didn't know what qualifications I needed and I thought, just do something I enjoy and that was why I did Microsoft Publisher.

Through utilising the social capital of the tutors, Katherine undertook a part-time work placement with an art shop which supplied the College and this built up her confidence further but she had begun to feel that she would like to work with children with learning difficulties. At the time of the interview she had just obtained a part-time job as a learning support assistant for a child with additional support needs and she was extremely happy with this outcome.

Katherine, like Alexis, did not represent one of the underprivileged whom the Scottish Government sought to lift out of poverty by improving their IT skills (Scottish Executive 20006b: 12). From the point of view of the economy she was probably under-employed and under-performing given her ability to create an earlier successful career for herself and it could be argued that she had not fulfilled her potential but her commitment to her family outweighed for her any

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other considerations. She had indeed thought of applying for a job at a university as a textile technician but was unable to commit to it because of being expected to work during school holidays. As an unpaid carer for her son she had saved society money for years and coming to the FLC suited her special circumstances. Her bounded horizon, however, would not itself have been achievable had she not come to the FLC which provided learning opportunities which fitted in with her family life. A mainstream class had not worked for Katherine because of its lack of flexibility and it is doubtful if she would have received the extra help which the FLC tutors in building up her confidence via the work placement facilitated.

Case Study 8: Jan

Jan was the friend who accompanied Katherine to the FLC and like Katherine she had been employed professionally before she had children. She was a qualified primary teacher who had taught for four years before giving up to look after her family for thirteen years but although her qualifications had not become redundant like Katherine's, she felt left behind because of lack of IT skills. With her youngest child now at school, she was facing decisions about her future and whether this would be possible in teaching at a time when there was a surplus of new young primary teachers and she was not competent in the use of ICT in education. Jan felt threatened because:

> It's just computers everywhere. My oldest daughter's at a brand new school and they've got all these interactive whiteboards and all sorts of technology and every teacher of every subject has got to be up-to-date.

In addition Jan felt excluded because she could not help her family with computers and they turned to her husband for help. As in Bryony's case, the woman had fallen into an inferior position with the husband the recognised expert in charge of the family computer:

> And I felt I didn't really know an awful lot, you know. My husband put the computer on and I would just go through the internet a wee bit, you know on the web. And nowadays… and also my children were coming home from school, you know, asking Dad all the time about computers but now they ask me, which is great.

Jan clearly had had a very strong vocational urge to be a primary teacher which was something she had always wanted to do and had done a Return to Teaching Course but felt afraid of interviews and aware of her lack of IT skills:

> Apart from the horror of going through interviews and that did fill me with horror, I noticed that apart from not being up to date with education matters my computer skills were really nothing, you know. I did a wee bit pottering about at home and I thought, you know, once my youngest is at school would be a good time to dip my toe in the water to see what there is out there.

Jan, like Katherine, could not commit to a mainstream course, in her case because of her husband's working pattern which meant some weeks he was away from home and could not help with childcare so again the flexibility of the learning provision was of great importance. She also appreciated the opportunity to speak to other adults and to build confidence:

> And I'm thinking about returning to work and it's made me feel more positive. I was so long away from the workplace and it's good and I'm meeting other adults again and I'm doing that and it's learning something new but it's also made me more confident and made me look again at what I could achieve, because I know I'm achieving and that's good.

The FLC here again provides the initial space where mature adults can meet, can learn in a setting where they feel at home and can achieve and can accommodate the demands of their family circumstances. In this environment acquiring IT skills leads to the computer moving out of its restricted and restricting place as an exclusively male preserve. Jan was catching up with her family and again moving away from the restricted identity of housewife and mother. At the same she was applying her computer learning in her home situation so that it became of practical use:

> I also try to use what I'm learning for whatever I can round the house. You know I've made up accounts using a spreadsheet because I thought it's the sort of thing if you don't keep using you'll forget to do it and I made up my wee girl's party invitations using Word Art and inserting boxes and things and I thought 'Oh well, that's quite a practical use'. I'm trying to apply it because I know if I stop I'll forget or I won't remember it so easily so I'm trying to… just wee things. I've been doing a weekly plan of all our activities.

Jan was unsure of her future but saw the FLC as helping her to acquire skills and confidence which increased her chances of employability.

Case Study 9: Olivia

The fourth stay at home mother Olivia had a very different background from the rest. She was born in Taiwan and only came to Britain at the age of 12 so she had the additional problem of learning a new language as well as adapting to a new educational system. Olivia stayed until Sixth Year at school and then did a national certificate in Computing at another college. She followed this up with starting an HNC in Computing but had dropped out and then went to university

for two years to do Computing Science but failed Programming and did not complete the course.

Olivia was therefore computer literate before she came to the FLC but took the ECDL and then Advanced ECDL course in the hope of obtaining qualifications which would lead to a part-time office job. The flexibility offered suited her childcare arrangements but apart from that she said that coming to the FLC had not impacted on her life nor changed her disposition to learning. The attraction for Olivia was simply the flexibility of the hours which fitted in with her family commitments and allowed her to sit Advanced ECDL while she looked for an office job.

Learners not Aiming at Improving Employability: Narratives

This group of learners was in a different situation from the others as none had improving employability as his/her ultimate aim. In the case of Charles, he was retired and came to the FLC as part of a structure he had created in his life which he saw as contributing to his health and well-being. Ian, Mary and Nancy had been forced to resign from their jobs after many years employment because of health issues and did not feel physically able to seek work while Deirdre as well as being made redundant had suffered a serious accident which had left her with only 50% use of her right arm and in addition was losing her sight. Nancy hoped to become self-employed at some point in the future

and Emily was hoping possibly to work at some time but not in the immediate future.

Case Study 10: Charles

Charles was 76 and had been attending the FLC for a period of almost ten years, longer than anyone else interviewed, and was one of a group of 19 retired males. This represented approximately 15% of male learners in 2006-2007. This percentage may well increase in the future as demographic shifts mean that there is an unprecedented and dramatic growth in the number of what would once have been seen as extremely old adults in their eighties and beyond (McNair 2009). Charles had originally been one of a group of retired middle class learners who came together to the FLC from a commuter village some nine miles from the College. Now that others in the group had died or become less active he had continued to attend by himself. Some of the other learners interviewed had mentioned him in their interviews and he had formed friendships with several people in the FLC as well as volunteering to help at the College annual conference. Basically he worked his way through every course that the FLC had to offer, taking on new ones as they became available and saw attending the FLC as a way of keeping himself healthy mentally:

> I am keeping the little bit between the ears active. I feel colleges of further education do a lot to improve people's general health, getting out and meeting people, activating the grey cells. My initial aim of stimulating the grey matter continues to be achieved, and contributes greatly to my excellent general state of health. I would even go so far as to say that colleges and their like could easily be seen as an extension

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of the NHS. This observation is arrived at by observing similar positive effects in fellow students.

Charles wanted to keep on coming to the FLC as long as he was able for social as well as educational reasons but because of deafness, did not want to go on to mainstream classes or to obtain higher qualifications:

> My family know that even if they have to wheel me here I won't give up the Flexible Learning Centre. The only reason I haven't gone on to do HNCs is because you have to sit in a class and hearing aids don't pick up sounds properly.

Charles's perception of the health benefits of attending the FLC appear to be borne out by research on the health benefits of education in general, yet retired learners have not been the subject of much government concern, apart from possibly those with low levels of literacy and numeracy. In 2004 Age Concern published a report on *The Economy and older people* which advocated some measures which have now happened including ageism becoming illegal but concentrated solely on older workers and older people lacking basic qualifications. Charles, however, falls into neither category as he was no longer working and had obtained a raft of formal qualifications. With many more people like Charles retiring, or perhaps now being made redundant, the question arises how ready colleges are likely to be to accommodate them and if they are likely to be displaced to accommodate younger people who may indeed be seeking work.

The demographics which mean Britain has an ageing population are often quoted yet according to Anderson (2008: 3):

> Over the last ten years the overall participation rate of older people in learning in the UK has remained broadly static. Worryingly, recently published participation figures show a dramatic drop in the number of adult learners participating in publicly funded adult learning. Between 2004/5 and 2006/7 the number of adult learners in publicly funded provision fell by over a million, with the greatest proportion of learners lost from those aged over 65. The loss of a large number of older learners from Further Education (FE) and Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL) is a matter of concern.

Field (2009) has recently spoken of the ageism of current government policies which ignore older learners in favour of the young. Apart from a keep fit class for the over fifties, and a thrice yearly pre-retiral course, there is no specific provision for the retired at Hollypark College. However, Charles highlighted that one of the reasons he enjoyed coming to the FLC was because he interacted with other learners by going out of the FLC to the College canteen and specific provision is perhaps is not always the best solution. Interestingly, Charles was happily married and had a close family network of daughters and grandchildren but coming to the College enabled him to speak to people outside the family circle and he valued this social contact:

> And I went down to the old refectory and there was a lot of very, very young students and they saw that I was quite old and I was eating my sandwich and having a coffee and they said, 'Can we come and join you?' And they were asking all sorts of questions about what I was learning and it was most enjoyable. It still is. I use the refectory. I must have my caffeine break you see and going down on your own, in no time someone is sitting beside you and gets chatting.

The fact that the FLC concentrates on computer courses means that it is likely to be particularly suitable for older learners who may have a fear of computers and for whom the traditional classroom situation may be threatening and it may also be particularly suitable for those like Charles who have hearing difficulties

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which often develop with ageing. Although Charles did not mention it, the quietness of the learning space, which other interviewees mentioned, is likely also to be particularly attractive to this age group.

Charles had spent all his adult life in employment, securing work after the demise of the mining industry in a new and expanding concrete industry and contributing to society very strongly and positively through voluntary activities including marriage guidance and being a member of the Children's Panel. At 76 he had made the FLC a focus of his life for some nine years, with attendance providing a voluntary structure he had created just as attending the FLC had done for some of the learners who had become unemployed. His learning, however, was much more long term, almost a kind of serial learning. In a global context, retired people are of more value to the economy as consumers than producers (Martin 2007) and in remaining intellectually and physically active, Charles was able to function for longer as a consumer. There is also an argument that older people may find the particular pedagogy of the FLC more appropriate. The tutor Yusef argued that the FLC is more suitable for older learners than a traditional classroom situation because there is not the pressure of a uniform pace:

> In the Flexible Learning Centre the age is different, so we get a student who is 25 and we get another student who is 90 and their learning style is completely different. Take into consideration that memory retention, the ability to actually learn and study in a framework is conducive to their needs and they're able to understand what they're studying. That is less likely to happen in the class.

Basically, this is a physical, I mean as we get older our ability to retain information and to remember information and there are so many researches on the subject that although older people are less likely to retain information the same way as the mature ones, or young ones. On the other hand they have more procedure and are more pragmatic and structured in their approach to tackling tasks. It takes them much longer than just younger ones.

Charles perhaps exemplifies one group of learners for whom the FLC offers a learning environment which has social, health and educational advantages. Wider society may well accrue economic and social benefits by investing in learners in this category for whom employment is not their aim as Jackson has pointed out (Jackson 2005: 196). If they return for a succession of courses Hyland and Merrill (2003) quote Goffman in claiming that this is institutionalisation but I am not sure, however, if this is a fair description. For Charles and others who come back year after year the relationships they make in this small learning community may be a vital part of their identity as people who no longer work but are still active physically and mentally. Jackson points out that older learners are 'more likely to be active citizens, to engage in volunteering, to enjoy better relationships with their families and social networks and to enjoy better physical and mental well-being' (Jackson 2005: 196). Perhaps this is something the policy makers should consider.

Case Study 11: Ian

Ian claimed that he 'enjoyed' secondary school but left once he had obtained his O levels. He then went straight from school to work in the Post Office where he was promoted from counter clerk to supervisor at head office and did

Accounts. Ian was 56, had undertaken no formal learning post-school which was not work-based and had worked in the Post Office for 36 years. Ian did not consider himself fit to work any longer as he had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease with only 50% lung capacity.

Ian had been caring for his mother, who had Alzheimer's Disease, since he left work four years previously and so he had taken on the identity of a carer. At the time of the interview he was worried that she would have to be taken into care permanently after she had had an accident. The Jobcentre staff had suggested he do a college course on computers as he had professed an interest in computers. It was not clear whether Ian merely complied with this or whether this was something he really wanted to do but he had been attending the FLC for two years two or three times a week.

Leaving work, suffering from ill health and caring for his mother meant that Ian came to the FLC at a crisis point in his life. He described it as an 'escape valve' from the pressures of caring for his mother:

> Aye. I came on average about three times a week for a coupla hours because I felt at that time when my mother was at home by the time I got here and then got back that was about three to three and a half hours I was away, so I thought that was long enough for leaving her. She's got Alzheimer's and I could never tell what I was gonna come home to and sometimes it was pretty horrific, I can assure you.

Ian saw two great advantages in attending the FLC: he could take up to a year to finish ECDL which took the pressure off him that he would have experienced in a conventional class and he could talk to someone other than his mother.

I think the main impact was speaking to people, being able to interact with people who could answer you, you know. No disrespect, it's an illness she's got and it cannae be helped but it's very, very frustrating trying to get any sort of general idea of what was going on in her head, what she was thinking, you know.

So I think from that point of view it was, you know, the interaction, being able to talk to somebody, having a blether, you know. The learning was also important as well but I think it was the fact I was getting out the house, speaking to people, you know I found was the main help.

In Ian's case it was actually the two tutors he spoke to and his assessment of the importance of this interaction underlines the key role played by the tutors in helping people to find a space not just to learn but to cope with the stresses of life. Here Ian obtained respite for a few hours a day from being a carer and the use of 'blether' suggests a different kind of relationship than the conventional learner/tutor or student/lecturer relationship. The fact that Ian was chosen for an award indicates that the tutors knew his story because he had felt empowered to tell his story to the tutors, and of course this is the case for all the other awardees. There is a sense of the FLC as a space where it is safe for learners to confide and where tutors take on the emotional labour which these confidences entail. It is interesting also that men can take this step despite the perhaps stereotypical perception that Scottish men do not find it easy to talk about themselves.

Ian could not make any real plans for the future as they were contingent upon his mother's future and what would happen when his role as carer ended was not clear. With an estimated 1 in 10 (Carers UK: 2009) of the population in

Scotland a carer and with the number of carers likely to be growing as the population ages, Ian represented a specific segment of the population whose needs flexible learning centres may be able to accommodate particularly well. For him the learning was not the most important outcome which was the escape from the isolation of being a carer and he actually described coming to the FLC as an 'escape valve'.

Case Study 12: Mary

By a coincidence, like Ian, Mary had spent most of her working life employed by the Post Office but in the manual job of a postwoman. Mary was the same age (46) as Grace at the time of the interview and like Grace had just left a job where she had been employed for a lengthy period of time, in this case 19 years. Mary had always worked since she left school with previous jobs in factories. She had not enjoyed secondary school and did not undertake any other formal learning until after she left her job with Royal Mail following increasing problems with back pain. Buying a computer was the trigger which decided her to learn.

She had gone to a typing course at another college but, like Grace, found being in a class very difficult and left without completing the course:

> Whereas you're going intae that class and everybody's doing the same thing and maybe some pupils are sort of faster at learning so people are sitting there wanting to get on but, you know, some people are sort of holding them back. Whereas, I felt coming to the FLC everybody's sort of doing different things so you're getting through the course at your own pace, which is quite good, you know, you're kind of left to do it at your own pace and I felt that was good.

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Like Bryony and Grace, being able to work at her own pace was important for Mary and, as discussed before, this is perhaps particularly important in acquiring IT skills.

Mary's back pain was still dominating her life at the time of the interview. She had been to various consultants and physiotherapists and had spent a considerable amount of her own money seeking a cure, but had been unable to obtain a diagnosis or any suitable treatment and her motivation in coming to the FLC was not about obtaining employment at the moment but partly about gaining skills which might be of use in the future. It was also about filling the emptiness left by losing the social contact of work and although she had a supportive partner, she missed that company. As she put it:

> I miss working, actually you know, because I've worked since I left the school at 16, well I'm 47 this year. I've never not worked so it's difficult. Plus it's a psychological thing; you miss the company after all those years working.

Mary had been attending for 18 months, usually one visit a week, and had undertaken several beginners' courses on computing in general and on Word and a keyboard course to brush up her typing skills which had not been used for years. Mary had become friendly with Charles, and two of the female interviewees as all three had helped assist at a CPD Conference for College staff. For Mary, the FLC could be seen as offering a maintaining function, perhaps almost a therapeutic function. She had lost her identity in the workplace and her narrative was dominated by her struggle to find an answer to the pain which hit her every day. Presumably if Mary had not developed the

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problems with her back, she would have continued working until retiral age and would not have sought out formal learning but coming to the FLC offered an alternative to spending every day in the house by providing an opportunity to acquire some new skills and meet some other people. It seemed quite probable that Mary would continue coming to the FLC and gradually in a kind of low key way build up her portfolio of courses in what has been described as the horizontal world of further education. This is more closely allied to the old welfarist idea of adult learning and while it could be argued that supporting Mary's learning probably makes no direct contribution to economic competitiveness, if we value an individual's well-being, it is possible to make a case for this kind of learning as benefiting her by strengthening her identity capital and probably contributing to maintaining her mental health. As Biesta (2008: 7) points out 'successful formal learning for adults does not depend on climbing a linear hierarchy of qualifications'. According to Schuller et al (2004: 33):

> A key conclusion is that the sustaining effects of learning are very powerful and should not be allowed to be overshadowed by more dramatic instances of transformation.

Case Study 13: Nancy

Nancy was 50 and her learning trajectory was completely different from that of anyone else interviewed with a sudden accumulation of qualifications after the age of 48. Nancy was considering self-employment as she had developed chronic fatigue syndrome and did not feel fit to work for an employer. Nancy's disposition to learning was also different with a clear sense of her own potential

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and a deep regret that she had not achieved more at school. Nancy had grown

up in a very big family of eight children in a small town in the Scottish Borders.

She said that she did very well in the first two years of secondary but that this

was not valued by her working class family who wanted her to leave school as

soon as possible for financial reasons. As a result, once she knew she was

leaving, she saw no point in working at school:

> So you knew it was a certain time until you got out of there sort of. I feel
> that I wasn't encouraged an awful lot. Lack of encouragement I think let
> me go down a route I shouldnae have went down. You know I think you
> were just one of many. And if you did something you shouldnae have
> done you didnae get any proper guidance about how tae fix it or what
> you were doing to your future by not listening.

Like Grace, therefore, Nancy took the ultimate step of failing to attend school

altogether and therefore perceived academic success as something she should

have achieved but was prevented from achieving partly because of her own

agency, getting in with the wrong crowd and playing truant, and partly because

of her family's failure to value qualifications. Like Grace, Deirdre and Bryony

she went straight from school into work and in her case worked in low paid jobs

in shops. When she married and had her child she went to practical evening

classes in sewing and knitting but despite the fact that she regretted not

achieving well at school found no chance to rectify this.

So far, Nancy's learning trajectory is perhaps predictable in the light of her lack

of school achievement and because she had the traditional female role of

mother and wife which left little space to do anything else. She was aware of

and regretted her lack of education but felt she had sacrificed herself for her family, job and home:

> I always regretted… I always regretted not having an education, I mean that was a big regret all my life but you know sometimes I think you give your life up to others, you know, your husband, your daughter, my job and the house and juggle all of these things. It's no easy tae… when can you take time out all that to find yourself?

Nancy's use of the expression 'find yourself' resonates with Britton and Baxter's (1999) concept of a latent or submerged self which Deirdre's narrative also hints at. Underneath the self of Nancy the wife and mother is another self, someone with an unfulfilled potential who could have done well at school and whose life might have gone down another path. The traditional woman's role of self-sacrifice, however, had precluded this for Nancy. What she hoped to do in the future was to move away completely from this into self-employment and qualifications were seen as underpinning this new potential role.

After 17 years working for an insurance company Nancy had to give up work because of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Suddenly she had time to learn for the first time since she left school and in two years embarked on course after course before coming to the FLC which was the last in the complex jigsaw of learning she undertook. In the two years Nancy completed an HNC in Social Sciences, a Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language, a Professional Development Award in Teaching Adult Literacies, a Community Development course and a course in Sage Payroll and Accounts. The only course she had dropped was an HND in Social Sciences. Several of these

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courses were clearly vocational courses which could have led to employment but Nancy had decided she wanted to be self-employed in the hope that she could cope with her illness better that way and felt she could not cope with full time work.

Altogether Nancy attended four college and two university courses over this period before coming to the FLC. Considering that she had done no formal learning since leaving school this is an astonishing achievement. However, she saw herself that what she had done was fragmented and lacked direction. She commented ruefully:

> I'm collecting certificates I think. But they're no really leading to anything. I could probably have had a degree by now if I'd just kept to one thing.

Nancy had also found that mainstream study did not work for her:

> You know I found through trying other courses that I wasnae able to maintain the study by going every single day and all the studying at home and exams… I needed something that was flexible but I also needed to get some sort of certificate at the end of it I didnae want tae just pass my time, I needed to qualify for something.

She intended to further her knowledge of Accounts to facilitate her goal of having her own business as an Accounts Technician and passed all the Accounts courses available at the FLC by coming three days per week and working her way through the courses in large blocks of learning. She also appreciated being able to learn at her own pace, which seems to have been a very fast pace.

Nancy clearly was looking for more than just the qualifications and underneath the surface of her narrative is a suggestion of some kind of desperation in all this sudden plunge into learning. Like Deirdre she used the adjective 'calming' to describe the FLC which suggests turmoil elsewhere in her life. Her one disappointment was that there was not more opportunity to become friendly with other learners and perhaps this is implied as something missing in her life after losing her identity as a worker:

> The only negative thing I think I would say is that you don't speak to many people. You know you go to a college you make friends but here you just put your head down and everybody's got their head down.

Perhaps this is one area where the FLC could look at improving the learning experience by giving learners more opportunities to interact informally with each other and is a theme which several of the interviewees brought up.

Of the learning stories of the women interviewed who left school without qualifications, Nancy stands out as different from the rest, apart perhaps from the fact that she was tied to a traditional female role which for many years constrained her learning opportunities. Her decision to attempt to set up in business was a complete reversal of that subordinate role and perhaps an attempt to step outside the gendered roles which dominated most of her life, just as her accumulation of qualifications was a reversal of her failure to achieve at school. Significantly perhaps, she found flexible learning particularly suited to her learning disposition and practical circumstances and would like to continue learning in this way if it were possible.

Nancy saw coming to the FLC as deepening her knowledge of Accounts, spreadsheets and databases and hoped this would be of use to her. For Nancy, the FLC did not have the dramatic impact it had for some of the other learners as it was just one of many learning opportunities she had undertaken and was an intense block of learning over a relatively short period of time. However, it is significant that for her it was the preferred mode of study.

Case Study 14: Deirdre

Deirdre also came from a working class family and attended a large city comprehensive school where she was never happy. Her mother brought her up alone and did not expect her to remain at school beyond the statutory leaving date but put pressure on her to leave and find work so that she could contribute to the family budget. In Deirdre's case she described a strong disposition towards learning which she felt the school teachers did not foster:

> I had a thirst for knowledge but I didn't feel – that sounds terrible – that the teachers were taking me where I wanted to be. So instead of being guided that way I thought I could just come out into the world and do it that way.

Deirdre went into immediate employment in a new department store where she felt she learned much more than she had done at school:

> I think when these big department stores started, they obviously, it was all new to them as well, so it was important to them to train their staff, which they did. You had constant training in there.

Deirdre narrated a story of a school where some teachers had given up and left classes to do what they liked, some pursued their own interests at the expense of the classes, while others had a reign of terror:

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> I had one teacher – that was when they still used the belt – and he used to have 3 or 4 belts lined up on his desk and just shout 'You! You! You! Out!' and he strapped everybody. And I just think that was terrible.

In these circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that Deirdre felt she had unfulfilled potential and there is a strong sense of what Britton and Baxter (1999) have described as 'a latent or suppressed self' in her description of why she came to college initially. Deirdre married at 19 and found herself bringing up her daughter alone after her marriage broke up when she was 22. Subsequently she worked part-time in small local shops to be there for her daughter. Deirdre had a very positive disposition towards learning in general, describing how when she was looking after her young daughter:

> My life had been solely my daughter's for the previous, well twelve years really. Part-time work didn't give me the kind of needs I had. It was just a means to allow me to have time with my daughter. So really that kind of energy was all kept down, that kind of thirst for knowledge was all kept down.

Deirdre constructed an identity for herself in this narrative therefore as a frustrated potential learner whose personal needs were subordinated to the needs of her daughter. For twelve years her identity was as a single mother with work conceptualised as just something to gain a little money. She did not regret this commitment to her daughter and spoke with great pride of her daughter gaining a degree and subsequently an excellent job which in a sense justified her mother suppressing her own educational needs. In 1993 she came to college to do a one year Secretarial national certificate course at SCQF level 5 which offered possible progression to an HNC and eventually a degree. Deidre's goal, however, her horizon, was limited to gaining skills for work so

that she could move out of the poorly paid part-time jobs she had done up to this point and in addition she was unable to afford to continue to the HNC. After finishing the secretarial course, she came to the precursor of the FLC as she felt she wanted to learn more while she looked for work. Her aim was principally to find work so she did all the modules she could and did voluntary work, finally gaining a job with a voluntary organisation, One Plus, which ran training schemes for single parents. At first she had a very basic job typing labels, but doing Accounts at college had given her a sense that she had an ability in this area and the next significant step in her life demonstrated a strong sense of agency, made possible both by the unconventional nature of the organisation and the discovery of what must have been a latent ability at college:

> I discovered I really liked Bookkeeping, the Accounts side of it. I could see things in OnePlus that made more sense so I started to do wee pieces there and then after about a year I thought, 'I'm doing an awful lot more in the Accounts side' so I spoke to the Director in the organisation and I had typed up my CV, which I suppose was quite cheeky and the work thing and I said to him, 'This is what I'm doing now'. So then I changed into the Accounts and then I ended up I managed the accounts in the organisation.

Throughout her 12 years with One Plus she gained no formal qualifications but her narrative described a process of constantly learning for her work:

> A lot of it was self-taught because I had never used Sage (Accounts) but I took it home with me, sat in the house and worked my way round the various programmes. So again you were constantly learning in there. But the shame of it was, and it was a shame, because you were working in the voluntary sector there wasn't a training budget, so you couldn't go on outside and bring skills back in. But again I enjoyed that because that really stretched my mind.

The job itself, however, was challenging and rewarding but came to an abrupt

end in 2007 when the company went into liquidation with debts of £2.27m.

Deirdre therefore was associated with a failed organisation and had nothing to

show for what she had learned informally over her ten years with the

organisation. Along with in excess of 600 other employees Deirdre now found

herself redundant and lost the social network she knew at work, the routine of

work and her identity as someone with an important role in an organisation.

This catastrophic event in her life was followed by an even worse catastrophe

when a fall resulted in her becoming disabled:

> I lost the use of this arm. I very nearly lost my arm. So that was quite a
> big… for six months I had no power in my right arm at all and I had to
> fight back and physio and everything. And I thought, 'I need to get my
> arm working again' and I did. Which is fine. And I thought, 'I need to
> work a computer again and get my head busy and get back out' and
> that's why I came back to college as I enjoyed it the last time.

In addition Deirdre's eyesight was deteriorating because of hereditary

glaucoma. Deirdre therefore came to the FLC with very limited possibilities for

employment but in her narrative conveyed no sense of being a victim. She was

not clear about what her future would be but intended to continue learning and

physically to 'get out' of the house. She put it like this, 'I think when most

people come into education again they don't want to let go'. Here education is

seen as something to hold onto, a lifeline perhaps, and the nature of the FLC

made that holding on possible for Deirdre both at the earlier part of her life

where it would not have been possible for her to do more mainstream courses

for financial reasons and at this later time of crisis. She undertook Sage

courses to 'learn properly', as she put it, what she had taught herself but she

also highly valued the College certificates she received for the short courses

and her Learner of the Year Award:

> It's a real achievement when you get these certificates. It's like being a
> child again and getting an award and you think , 'It's really nice' and
> even that Learner of the Year Award, I didn't know you did anything like
> that. It was such a nice day. It was lovely. I thought it was fabulous. It
> maybe does take you back to being five years old. I've got a folder in
> the house and I've got them all from when I was here the first time. I've
> got everything all nicely flat and so they're kept. It's an achievement.
> Maybe because I left school before I was 15 and didn't have anything
> these things are more important to me now.

Deirdre's comment about being taken back to being five years old is a very

interesting one as for all these learners who did not flourish at secondary

school, their dispositions to learning at five and indeed right through the primary

had been very enthusiastic and positive. One hypothesis which has emerged

from this research is that perhaps the FLC in a rather strange way replicates

some of the features of primary education. This comparison cannot be pushed

too far as the narratives show a clear need for the learners to be treated as

adults and to be in an adult environment. However, the learner comes to know

one tutor and can form a relationship with him which is more like the

relationship with a primary rather than a secondary teacher. The tutor knows

the learners very well individually because there is a maximum of 20 present at

any one time and the tutor operates in his own personal learning space which

he has personalised. For the learners this place they come to all the time is

familiar and welcoming and even the layout of the desks is different from that in

a mainstream computer laboratory with some of the informality of the primary classroom. The scale of the actual learning space has the intimacy of the primary classroom too and the possibility of passing short courses and receiving certificates echoes gold stars and achievement recognition in primaries.

Deirdre also recognised that receiving certificates, as well as boosting her self-esteem, was important for employers and that the FLC could compensate to an extent for the fact she had nothing to show formally for what she had learned in her last job:

> And then plus, even going back into a work situation now, even though I've got all these years' experience I've got no papers to say this is what I can do, this is what I can't do, so hopefully having these certificates will help me get into some places as well if I go back to work. It doesn't always go by experience, does it, some people want the papers.

> Plus the knowledge it's given me. I worked my way through Sage and the Accounts and worked all that out myself but seeing how there's other ways, there's lots of ways you can do things, seeing this now I think, 'Oh, I could have short-cutted and did it that way instead of trying to struggle round it' but hopefully the experience I've had here will let me into something else.

For Deirdre the other aspects of coming to the FLC, the creation of structure and the building of new social capital in a life which had been fragmented by redundancy and the disabling accident were of great importance:

> But it was all about building confidence back up, getting back into a routine again, which I thoroughly enjoyed and I met some really nice girls in there as well. That's been good as well, the sociable aspect. And the routine as well.

Deirdre, however, felt that the FLC could have done more to foster social relationships among the learners and suggested 'chill and chat sessions'.

Deirdre also spoke of how

> …it helped coming back to college and being able to know that I can use the computer again because I'm out now doing research on my family tree and things. Again that's filling in my time.

Deirdre intended to continue learning and to push herself 'as far as I can go'. Her narrative really was a story of success against the odds and fulfilment at work through self-education against the narrative of the struggle of a single mother to do the best for her child. There is a strong possibility that coming to the FLC latterly had helped her in developing further the resilience to deal with the major blows which had been dealt her in mid-life by giving her a place to go, learning which could be credited and the possibility of creating friends.

Case Study 15: Emily

Emily, at 20 was the youngest of this group. She came from a working class housing estate a few miles from the College and there was no mention of family pressures to leave school. However, Emily, did not achieve at school because:

> I don't think I wasn't interested: there was a lot of carry-on in my head. I left school and that. I wanted to be a hairdresser.

Emily's disposition to learning suggested a low self-esteem. She said that the FLC tutor explained things to her in 'words I can understand' but at school she became disengaged and waited impatiently to leave. Emily had had several jobs after leaving school in low paid employment such as in chip shops and

cafes but had then suffered a depressive illness. She had started a

Hairdressing course at another College campus but failed to complete it and

had also started a course in the College Business School but had not

completed it either.

Thus a failure to flourish at school had been followed by a failure to flourish at

two separate College campuses and on two different courses. Emily had

suffered from a depressive illness and also had serious weight issues but

despite this history was basically trying to transform herself, both physically and

educationally. She had embarked on a diet and lost four stones, obtained a

provisional driving licence and was going on holiday abroad for the first time.

Emily stated, 'I really want to change my life, changing the weight, driving,

doing the course.'

Undertaking ECDL therefore was seen by Emily as part of a transformatory

process. Like several other learners, Emily appreciated the quietness in the

FLC and the very fact that it was not the same as other college classes. She

had gained confidence as she was attempting ECDL and was allowed to sit the

exams when she felt ready. Her mother had explained to the tutors that if she

was put under too much stress she would not attempt the exams and the FLC

was able to accommodate this by allowing her to pace herself towards the

exams. Already she had passed four of the seven modules. Emily praised the

FLC because:

It's very different from the usual college class. It's quiet, it's relaxing and it's a lovely area. I do enjoy the FLC and it's easy for me as you can come when it suits you.

Emily hoped to go on to obtain an office job. Like Bryony her horizon was practical and was limited educationally but in view of her history her achievement was considerable. Emily had come to the FLC after seeing an advert for ILAs. For her the FLC opened up the possibility of success for the first time in the face of mental illness and earlier failures. It is clear that attending brought her benefits. As she put it herself:

It has gave me confidence. Ambition. I want to start a new life. Since January I've made a lot of changes.

Bringing about possibilities of change seems to me to be the strongest contribution which the FLC made in Emily's case, providing a pre-employment space where dispositions may alter and learners may move forward from a wounding past.

Conclusion

Analysing the narratives of the learners suggests that the learning culture of the FLC is effective as a learning space for those who have difficulty in learning IT skills in mainstream courses. The suggestion is that learning these skills presents special difficulties for those whose school education pre-dated using computers and that individualised learning is likely to be the best approach.

For certain learners, especially older learners, fear of computer literate young people's perceived superiority in IT skills suggests that learning with other mature learners is most likely to lead to success.

Providing an opportunity for structuring lives after redundancy or retirement or the onset of illness also appears to be an important function of the FLC which mainstream classes cannot accommodate. It is also important for accommodating carers' needs for flexibility and providing a pre-work learning space for mothers who have been at home for years. Although there are some opportunities for gaining social capital, these could perhaps be maximised.

Chapter 7: The Tutors' Identities and Teaching Philosophies

And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche

Chaucer: *The Prologue: The Clerk*

Introduction

In this chapter I begin by exploring the professional identity of the FLC tutors
and the relation between their practice and the acquisition of teaching
qualifications. The tutors' own learning trajectories and dispositions to learning
are then discussed to frame a discussion of how they view the relevance of
employability and the learners' acquisition of skills and their own practice.

The Tutors' Roles

The learners who attend the FLC, therefore, are very different in their
habituses, their learning trajectories and the reasons why they come to the
FLC. However, all undertake the same type of learning and all interact with the
two tutors who between them cover the tutoring for 50 weeks of the year.
For some learners, like Ian, the tutor is the only person apart from the
receptionist, to whom they speak and learners like Ian may form a relationship
with the tutor which involves talking about their personal lives. As the younger
tutor Jim put it:

> Yusef and I tend to get the news whether we want it or not from a lot of
> our learners. We tend to sort of… they must feel that we are
> approachable enough…I take it it's a good thing that they can offload
> this sort of information on us.

There is almost a sense of reluctance in his description of this aspect of the relationship and the use of the verb 'offload' suggests that for Jim a burden is being passed from the learners to him, dumped on him as it were, although paradoxically he sees this ultimately as a 'good thing'. His use of the terms 'news' and 'information' is also interesting suggesting an ongoing narrative being told by the learners to update the tutors, perhaps similar to 'telling time' in primary schools. The 'news', of course, is what matters to the learners in their lives and given that many come to the FLC at a turning point in their lives, the stories some construct are likely to be emotionally draining for them and perhaps also for the tutors. The tutors may be much more than the rather passive recipients of these narratives suggested here and in listening to the learners the tutors seem to be undertaking considerable emotional labour. This may be viewed as contributing towards employability as some learners may need to build up confidence or even find an outlet for discussing situations they cannot discuss at home before they even look for work. The tutors, however, also take on a direct role in supporting some learners to find work, for example, using their social capital to place Katherine in a work placement in an art shop and providing references for others. In some instances, the tutor's role strayed into other areas, for example Yusef described personally installing a computer for an elderly woman at home and here he had stepped outside the usual tutor/learner relationship.

Professionalism and the FLC Tutors

For some of the learners, as their narratives have indicated, classrooms are

seen as threatening places and teachers or even FE lecturers may represent to

them people who have failed them in the past. Some see the FLC academic

staff as fundamentally different from teachers, as has been discussed in the

context of the learning culture, and this mirrors the status of the FLC staff as a

contested area within current discourses of professionalism of staff in FE.

James and Biesta (2007: 130) have summarised the two main theoretical

approaches to what characterise professions. The functionalist/consensus

view sees the distinctive attributes of a profession as possibly including

> …a set of skills based on a body of theoretical knowledge, a clear route
> to qualification for practitioners, a code of conduct, an ethic of altruism
> and relatively high rewards.

It could be argued that FE lecturers in Scotland are a profession as there are

government standards for FE lecturers and teaching qualifications approved at

national level to overtake these standards and there are clear routes for

qualification via the Teaching Qualification in FE or at an introductory level the

Professional Development Awards which deal with Teaching in Further

Education. However, there is no code of practice, nor is the profession at

lecturer level particularly highly rewarded even in comparison to school

teachers although there is certainly an ethic of altruism as recent research has

illustrated (Crossan et al 2005, James and Biesta 2007). Gaining a

qualification has indeed become increasingly important since the Review of

Scotland's Colleges Staffing, Learners and Learning Environments (SLALE) Report (Scottish Government 2000c) and the government's acceptance of the recommendation that colleges should ensure all new permanent full-time lecturers obtain the Teaching Qualification Further Education (TQFE) within three years of appointment while permanent part-time lecturers should obtain the qualification within five years. The tutors themselves use the word 'professional' to describe themselves and what they do, although their work does not fit easily into the professional qualification framework. The problem is that although there is a clear route to qualification it tends in effect to draw a distinction between those who teach skills or support learning and those higher level 'professional' lecturers who engage in facilitating learners to become independent learners, co-authors of their own learning. The teaching qualification used by the College demands at least 120 hours of traditional teaching which consists of 'delivering' lessons which are carefully planned and assessing students and recording the assessments. This TQFE course does not give validity to alternatives to the traditional classroom pedagogy nor does it evaluate or promote the dispositions which may be necessary for tutors to be successful in creating the kind of learning culture of the FLC. To become a 'professional' lecturer therefore, the FLC lecturer has to move outside the practices of the FLC and take part in traditional teaching. This reflects what James and Biesta (2007: 132) describe as the

> …idea that 'teaching' always means observable teacher talk or the directing of students 'from the front' in real time.

What the tutor actually does in the FLC, by implication becomes something of lesser importance, something less 'professional', although paradoxically the learners may gain more from it than from attending a traditional class.

The Tutors' Learning Trajectories

The nature of professionalism for Scottish FE lecturers is therefore a rather weak concept. In theory anyone who is skilled in a vocational area can walk into a college and begin to teach classes without training. Many FE teaching staff come into FE via diverse routes rather than directly, as James and Biesta (2007) have established, and this is the case with the two tutors. Yusef, (51), the older and more experienced tutor with 15 years association within the FLC at the time of the interview, had a degree in Business and Administration from a university in the Middle East. Yusef had worked selling insurance and in car sales in Saudi Arabia and then

> …I worked in other projects like creating the Index of the Middle East which is similar to the Yellow Pages and was doing coding and decoding for the government in the communications system: this is when I got more involved in computing.

Yusef married a Scotswoman and moved to Scotland where he did a year's post-graduate secondary teaching course which qualified him as a Business Studies teacher. Yusef's first experience of FE was as a part-time student who obtained an HNC in Electrical Engineering in Hollypark College. He had worked in two secondary schools but had left them for part-time teaching in Hollypark College and Eastglen College. This kind of work trajectory from schools to FE is quite common for teachers qualified in subjects which colleges

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and schools have in common and is often a path for those who do not enjoy school teaching. Interestingly Yusef had gone into school teaching just at the point (1986) when the belt was banned and he found this transitional period difficult:

> At that time the discipline has changed and the way the authority, the teacher and the actual staff authority over the student, control on what they can do, and it was a bit loose, I think was a bit…a transition element from the old teaching and the new teaching.

Yusef therefore moved from having an identity as a trained school teacher, and what may perhaps have been negative experiences of school teaching, to an identity as a college lecturer in the Business School and finally can be seen as evolving a separate identity as a FLC tutor. This was a process which took several years as the FLC gradually moved, both physically to a discrete building and from its original role of supporting college students to answering the needs of learners who came to it specifically and did not attend other college courses. He was involved in setting up the original FLC because of his self-acquired computing skills and he drew a very clear distinction between what he saw as its adult education ethos and schools' ethos. Yusef had reflected about the two systems and concluded:

> However, in schools it's more theoretical and you build them on programmes and you teach them exactly what you are given to teach, so it's like a more behaviourist approach while the Flexible Learning Centre is more constructivist. So between these two approaches I think the schools are more still rooted in the old system of teaching and learning, although there are changes like by starting putting them in groups but the curriculum stayed in the behaviourist approach where instructions are given and oranges are discussed for one day and other fruits are not allowed to be mentioned.

The second tutor, Jim had taken a degree in Information and Management

Sciences majoring in Urban and Rural Development. However, he had felt

from the first year at university that he had made a mistake but as he put it:

> But yes I studied that and with hindsight, well, it probably wasn't the right
> choice to make straight out of school. I did it and I saw it through.

Jim had followed this qualification with a one year postgraduate Diploma in IT

Skills and had then found himself looking for employment. His disposition

towards school teaching had been affected by his disaffected teacher father

who was approaching the end of a school teaching career and put him off the

idea of school teaching. After considering teaching English as a second

language in Japan, he registered on a graduate employment scheme and was

offered a work placement as an administrator in the FLC. After a few months a

full time administration post became available and he obtained this post.

Finally when, after various part-time staffing solutions, the need for two full time

tutor posts was established, Jim obtained one of these posts in 2004. Jim's

path to the FLC had therefore been via a degree which did not lead to

employment and via working as an administrator initially. He had an almost

messianic disposition towards the FLC, seeing it as something different from

any other form of education:

> I think to be honest I've been influenced more about education since
> coming here. I've certainly thought about it a lot more. Perhaps that's
> obvious but I've really had my eyes opened since coming to Hollypark
> and being properly involved in education. And I'm very much today
> about our College ethos learn for life. That's what we essentially try to
> deploy every day in the Flexible Learning Centre.

I can see that the education does a lot more than school and university. It's a lot more than school, college and university. It can accomplish many things.

Jim had no qualifications as a teacher because there were difficulties in obtaining the type of teaching demanded to fit in with the occupational standards for lecturers. Essentially this was contingent on asking other faculty heads if they could give him a class, which depended on their staffing situation. The FLC administrator in fact objected to Jim and Yusef being seen as lecturers and made the following point:

> But to me a lecturer is someone who stands in front of a classroom and actually delivers a course to numerous people at the one time and does a lot of preparation work for the courses as well, whereas in the Centre it's very much the course materials are already prepared with a few modifications and you're essentially helping people to understand the material and to work through the exercise and I don't think you need to be a lecturer in order to be a tutor.

Some college managers in Scotland would tend to agree with this view of what a college lecturer is and some flexible learning centres in other colleges are staffed by people designated learning centre assistants or other similar job titles. This reflects the confusion Lucas (2004) identified in English FE colleges where 193 job titles described roles under the general heading Teaching and Learning. This raises the question of what exactly a lecturer's role is and what makes him/her professional. The Scottish Further Education Unit produced a discussion paper in 2004 which tried to predict the future of the professional lecturer in 2014. The authors speculated that:

> There may be a clearer definition of the role of 'lecturer' and a distinction drawn between it and other types of post involved in teaching: in other words there may be a range of teaching and para-teaching posts in FE colleges of which the post of lecturer more or less as currently understood (but perhaps with a different name) will be one, each with

different qualification requirements, duties, conditions of service and salary scales (SFEU 2004: 18).

The report envisaged future lecturers as few in number as it would be too expensive to employ many of them and suggested four grades of staff: chartered lecturer, lecturer, instructor and learning support assistants. Six years later, there is no consistency across the sector with some colleges having instructor and learning assistant posts at lower rates of pay than lecturers but unions successfully resisting their introduction in other colleges. No chartered lecturer post has evolved.

It could be argued that the tutors fall into SFEU's category of para-teachers if their work is more limited than other teaching staff with the result that they cannot overtake some of the standards. If this were to be accepted, there are important questions of status for if they are support staff, they would have less holiday entitlement and different conditions of service and be paid less. In reality the FLC staff do have shorter holidays than mainstream lecturing staff as the FLC is opened during all college holidays except Christmas although they have extra contracts for these hours which mean that they earn more than their conventional teaching colleagues but in effect have worse conditions of service, although the extra hours are voluntary. One fundamental question which arises, however, is whether what they do has value equal to the work of their colleagues or possibly, for the cohort of learners which the FLC attracts, even more value as it may play an essential role in creating the circumstances which enable some learners to re-engage with formal education.

The Tutors' Professional Identities

This raises fundamental questions about what constitutes the tutors' professional identities. Indeed the use of the word 'tutor', which is a self-adopted term reminiscent of discourses of adult education, gives some clue to their habituses. In the past, adult education according to Field was dedicated to 'enlightenment, social improvement and the support of social movements' (Field 2006: 66). Traditionally, as Edwards has pointed out, adult education was seen as liberal education with FE seen as mainly vocational. Adult educators were often referred to as tutors but College staff were designated from the start as lecturers perhaps in an attempt to differentiate them from school teachers and adult tutors alike or to give them some kind of status nearer to that of the university staff. In Hollypark College only the lesser-paid adult literacy and numeracy support staff, are officially referred to as tutors.

Jim and Yusef's designation of themselves as tutors may also be related to their rather negative dispositions toward school teaching and is reflected in Yusef's philosophy of education where he sees what he is doing as nurturing adult learning:

> So, it is adult learning: it is more active learning I think, in summary more active - the learner is more engaged in the learning, they are more aware of what they can do or what they want to do. They have this personal efficacy and they have more responsibilities and I think that's why they are studying.

These learners, rather than students therefore, are supported/taught/facilitated by the 'tutors'. In their interviews, the tutors try to define what a tutor is by

creating a binary opposition between the concepts of tutor and lecturer. Jim

sees a tutor as friendlier and the term tutor is seen as something 'which sort of

works better with our learners'. The use of 'our' suggests that the FLC learners

are different from other learners in the College. Both tutors assume their

learners have had negative experiences of teachers in the past. Both see a

lecturer as a traditional didactic figure, the sage on the stage, although it could

be argued that concept is pretty much outdated in current discourses of

teaching and learning in FE. Yusef sees himself as working 'more to support

and you get to know the learner on a personal, an individual level to see their

progress and their feedback'. This Humanist model of the FLC tutor as

nurturing is interesting because there is no network for FLC tutors to discuss

practice and share challenges, although there are subject networks for

lecturers and networks for manager and support staff, so Yusef appears to

have developed his philosophy as a result of his own reflection on a flexible

learning centre tutor's role. The other interesting point is that although the

learners are undergoing transition when they come to the FLC, the tutors alone

give them support and this they see as an essential part of their role. The

tutors are isolated and this can lead to the FLC becoming a hermetic world for

both staff and learners with no reference points to other centres to evaluate

what they are doing. There is therefore a fragility about the tutor identity and

perhaps a need to affirm it in the face of what may be seen as a world which

does not understand it.

The tutors had to try to reconcile their job title of lecturer with their concept of themselves as tutors. One way Jim reconciled these contradictory identities was to suggest that the learners could relate to the idea of tutor better because:

> Although my job title is actually lecturer I always refer to myself as a tutor and we refer to ourselves as tutors in the Guide. I think it's really sort of the traditional view of a lecturer. We don't do. Well we do but it's a small part of what we do. We're not involved in those traditional means of delivery.

> Tutor is a softer term I suppose as well and I think it's a term that sort of works better with our learners. Because many of them being adult returners would associate the word lecturer with a person standing dictating a lesson at the front of a class and obviously what we do is very different to that.

He elaborated on this theme, suggesting that for the learners a lecturer is

> …basically an older man, probably standing at the front of a classroom or a lecture hall delivering a lesson with an overhead projector in the background and a tutor is someone who comes over and sits down with you in short bursts of one to one.

Jim creates a binary opposition between this construct of a remote, male didactic figure holding forth to a totally passive audience, really more recognisable in universities of the distant past than 21st Century FE colleges, and the tutor who sits beside the learner in a friendly one-to-one way. In reality of course, very few college classes nowadays would be conducted in the way he constructed here and many lecturers may indeed sit down with learners to give them individual help. The majority of lecturers would also be female, except in the case of some vocational areas. The perceived differences of the FLC tutors from their lecturer colleagues may not therefore be as marked as the tutors contend.

Yusef's own description of a lecturer was very similar to this supposed adult returner's view:

> That is in contrast to the Flexible Learning Centre is that the tutor is there more to support and you get to know the learner on a personal, on individual level to see their progress and their feedback. In a class, the lecturer is less likely to have this benefit because he's standing in front of the class, taking the class and answering the questions relating to the lecture he's actually presenting.

Finally Jim summed up their identities in this way:

> I think they (tutor and lecturer) are interchangeable but tutor is sort of more, a sort of more relevant term in terms of how the Centre operates although we certainly do many of the things that lecturers do.

The question which arises here is, do these tutors actually have a different identity from lecturers and if so, is supporting learning, which is a role Yusef mentions, a different job from that of a lecturer's with consequent implications for power and status? Although lecturers have no professional body and no code of practice, they still see themselves as professionals and the occupational standards which underpin the Teaching Qualification in Further Education spell out what the role of a professional lecturer should be. The standards specified cover Guidance and Support, Planning and Preparing the Learning Experience, Teaching/Facilitating Learning, Assessment, Quality and Standards and Professional Practice and Development (Scottish Executive 2006g).

Jim defended his position as equivalent to a lecturer:

> But part, a small part of why I use that word lecturer in certain circumstances is because in certain circumstances I feel that 'tutor' can imply that we don't do things like preparation, marking etc which we

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actually do. We prepare in the Centre. We do mark work albeit it's a lot softer if you like than takes place elsewhere in the College, but we still mark work. We give feedback to learners so we certainly do everything else that lecturers are doing. We develop materials. So I feel that sometimes 'tutor' can mistakenly be taken as a term where that sort of… isn't involved - and it very much is.

Jim saw the term tutor as being adopted for the sake of the learners to counter negative and threatening images which the term 'lecturer' might convey to them. Judging from the interviews, learners are less likely to have negative connotations of the term college lecturer than of teacher, especially in several cases, of secondary teacher. Both tutors referred to 'our learners'. The power differential is very clear and the tutors are in a privileged position regarding the learners as unlike their mainstream lecturer colleagues they do not have to struggle with issues of classroom management. Their learners therefore, are unlikely to see them in a situation where they are publically challenged because they interact with learners on a one-to-one basis, sitting beside the learner and speaking quietly so that any demanding learners make their demands individually rather than in the public arena of the classroom. With many learners starting at the very beginning in computing, the tutors' expertise is immediately acknowledged and rarely challenged. It is clear that for the learners interviewed, the tutors are admired and trusted and in some cases seen as confidants. Nancy and Katherine both described them as very professional. To Bryony, however, they are 'just folk that are there and you can ask them anything you want'. This seems to envisage them as accessible friends rather than remote professionals. Using the term 'just folk that are

there' suggests there is no gap between them and the learners unlike the

teacher/pupil relationship she remembers at school. Deirdre admired them

because they have

> …such nice personalities because I've never heard anyone get agitated
> or, I mean, I haven't because sometimes they get pushed to the limit.
> They've got a really nice nature'.

For Alexis, they are there in their strength to stop her falling or failing:

> You know they take time to explain things and they also give you very
> good eye contact, which I like. It's actually difficult I suppose. You just
> know you aren't going to fall, do you know that? You know you're not
> going to fall because they're going to be there to support you. And that's
> just it.

The tutors expressed somewhat similar views about their role. Yusef claimed

to have a vocation because when he was a student, he was so helpful to other

students that they told him he should become a teacher:

> Moving to teaching actually stemmed from the fact that I was helping
> students within the class and they enjoyed my approach and most of
> them said 'You should be a teacher, you should be a teacher' and I was
> enjoying my teachers and the subject I was studying then so the
> teachers were very helpful and felt they were really doing something to
> change the way we perceived the world.

Transformations and Employability

The role of the FLC in fostering employability was something which had been

discussed in meetings with the staff as part of a College drive to respond to

Scottish Funding Council emphasis on employability but when speaking about

what the FLC did, this was actually not seen as central by either Yusef or Jim.

Each was asked about what had been his most rewarding experience of

working in the FLC, and each constructed a narrative of an individual whose life

was changed but perhaps significantly neither of these individuals was seeking

employment. Yusef told the following story:

> My most rewarding experience is when a learner comes and says 'I really enjoyed the course and it's really making a difference to my work or to my life or even to chatting in the pub and start knowing what people are talking about. It's making my understanding of the world more worthwhile'.
>
> And that can be summarised by this story; a lady who was 78 came to the Centre. So three months on, she was able to use the Internet. She bought a computer, I connected it and installed the internet for her at home and she was able to send and receive e-mail to her 11 grandchildren who are spread across the world, some in Canada, some in Australia. So they were able to send photos.
>
> She did not at all have any clue at first what is a computer or what it can do and the excitement on her face and every session and what she achieved after she leaves, it speaks worth millions. I'm sure she goes to the community and tells them what she was doing.
>
> Three years on, a lady appeared at the door, at the Flexible Learning Centre and asked to speak to me. She said, 'You don't know me but my mum passed away last year. And before she died, she asked me to come (as like part of her will) and tell you something.' And I said 'Okay, what is it?' and she said, 'My mum says to say to you, thank you for making my life worthwhile.'

Yusef saw himself as changing the world for his learners like his own teachers,

not just to promote employability. In this there seems more affinity with the

discourses of lifelong education than the more recent stress on vocationalism.

He said that his role was

> …to have to go out of your own way and really help the students and reduce their suffering in their learning. It's more like suffering and frustration: it gives them stress.

Learning here is seen as a struggle with the tutor as a kind of learning doctor or

perhaps therapist who alleviates these painful symptoms and for some learners

like Alexis whose current life had become dominated by a sense of struggle the

tutor may indeed be playing a part in helping her to cope. For Yusef, how he perceives what he does is no less than 'making people's lives worthwhile'. All the learners interviewed, except for Olivia, saw coming to the Flexible Learning Centre as being instrumental in making changes in their lives but apart from Alexis whose self-esteem was almost non-existent, none gave the sense that his/her life had been transformed from valueless to worthwhile by coming to the Centre. The Centre had been a refuge, an escape route or a bridge, to use some of the metaphors deployed in some of the narratives, an alternative to the uncongenial world of the conventional classroom for others. Yusef sees the role of the tutor as bringing about transformations which make fundamental differences in people's lives. This begs the question, is the FLC's success dependent on the personality and almost therapeutic approach of the tutors above all, as in community learning centres? If the answer to this question were to be yes, it might be expected that the FLC would exhibit characteristics of what Crossan et al discovered in community learning centres (Crossan et al 2005) and designated the 'fur-lined rut'. They found that the support in these centres was such that learners were unlikely to move on and could remain at the centre sometimes for years. Of the FLC learners interviewed, however, there was only one learner who had been attending for several years working his way through courses in this way and this was Charles, who was retired and had built the Centre into the routine and structure of his retirement. Others attended until they achieved goals such as gaining jobs or finding a path they

wished to follow and this could vary from a few months to the longest time of two years.

Jim found it difficult to choose an example of the most rewarding experience for him as he said he had hundreds of examples. He finally told this story:

> I had a learner in who actually started ECDL with us and had effectively to abandon it only a relatively short while in, due to her mother taking ill. Her mother subsequently died and she had had a very, very hard time with her and she actually came back in and actually asked to see me to see if she could essentially pick up the ECDL.
>
> And from that point she has been an absolutely rock solid learner. She's in every Wednesday sort of mid afternoon/early evening making great progress. She's been tested setting a very decent pace and she completed her last module test last night. And she was absolutely delighted. She ended the session by saying, you know, I was to pass on great thanks to Yusef who's obviously been in contact with her a lot as well and how great we've been in getting her through it and how you know it's just been a real achievement for her.
>
> And that's been a very recent example of what sort of makes the job so enjoyable is that we get very tangible benefits from it, actually seeing in that case someone's mood and a small part of their life just being changed by completing a qualification and gaining a real sense of achievement.

Here what is important to Jim is seeing someone overcoming difficult circumstances and 'a small part of their life' being changed', in sharing their sense of achievement. This learner was not looking for work at that time but had set herself a goal at a time when she felt emotionally drained and lacked confidence in herself. Her role as a carer had ended with the loss of her mother and taking ECDL filled that space in her life and gave her a sense of moving forward.

The Tutors' Views of their Practice

Yusef used several interesting metaphors to explain his philosophy of flexible learning. One was of the learners being transported in a vehicle:

> And as I argued before in my work that to support the learner would require, it's like taking the learners in a car from a source to a destination.

There is a sense here of the learners lacking agency and being people who are supported rather than being independent as the tutor is presumably the driver in this analogy and they are being taken to a destination, rather than making their way there themselves. Perhaps, however, it could also be interpreted that the tutors are accompanying them on a journey which, if they lack the basic skills, they could not make themselves. Yusef also claimed that he was trying to make learners independent:

> And we try to promote independent learning, and with this struggle I use myself Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development where you take the learner and attach them to the tendency and give them, like drip feed and then reduce it and reduce it until they become independent learners and they start, like a small bird and then fed, fed, fed and the bird can fly on their own and that is exactly what we're trying to with our learners, most of our learners and try to shift some of the learners from their surface approach to learning to deeper approach to learning to make them engage in more research and then go further and further.

On one level learners certainly may become more independent in the FLC as learners describe having to ask for help all the time at first and gradually being able to work on their own as they acquire skills, but the reality is that this is not about learners using a deep learning approach or engaging in research. It is more about learners learning to fulfil an employability need, or to fill a gap in their current place in their life-course or to rebuild fragmented identities.

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Jim saw what the learners were involved in as short term, practical and focused:

> It's just a fact that a lot of our learners are only coming to the Flexible Learning Centre and probably only will come to the Flexible Learning Centre because we fit their needs. They want some short bursts of learning to take away and, as I said, deploy at home or in the office and aren't particularly bothered about taking on full time or part time courses.

Take-away learning is an interesting concept which seems to echo some of the government approaches to the learner as consumer and although Jim acknowledged that the FLC may be part of a continuum of learning, going on to HNC or HND levels, this is not what he saw as its primary function. None of the learners interviewed in the study had any ambition to progress to upper academic levels in computing and this is equally true for those who are employed and come to the FLC. It is true that there is the odd exception to this with some learners progressing from the FLC to mainstream computing courses and coming back for support from the tutors if they need it. One example was actually featured at UK level in a Department of Trade and Industry leaflet on women obtaining IT skills when a mother who came to the FLC with no IT skills went on to gain a computing degree. Another example this year is an accident victim who again had no previous IT skills who is moving on to study HND Multi Media.

For Jim what gave him satisfaction as a tutor is seeing such individual triumphs, or more frequently much smaller individual triumphs on the part of learners.

This seems to be the main focus for the tutors, seeing learners acquire skills and move towards a greater sense of agency. He rejoiced in the achievements of his learners and the effect on himself when he saw learners succeed was described in this way:

> I'm absolutely buzzing with it, that's the phrase because I'm really energised. In such a good session I've really felt like it's just been something – there's been some real quality learning taking place.

By 'quality learning' Jim seemed to mean learning episodes when there is visible progress and success happening. He saw his role in supporting this as needing to have all the answers to questions which learners may raise:

> My sort of goal which I've kind of set out is that I always like to go over and sit down with a learner and solve the problem confidently as if immediately, you know I don't even need to look at the actual page or anything and that instils confidence in them but given that we've got so many courses and literally thousands (if you counted it up) of potential stumbling blocks if you put all the courses together, to actually go over and do that, it takes a lot, you really have to keep on top of the subject matter and you have to try and always second guess where certain learners are going to trip up.

The Tutors' Visions of the Future of the FLC

All the members of FLC staff tended to spend their whole working week in the FLC, eating in a small kitchen , the tutors working in a small office in close proximity to the learning area when they are not scheduled to be with learners and always accessible to learners even when they are not on duty. This perhaps fosters the very close relationships which spring up between the tutors and learners but it also limits the possibility of becoming part of the whole College. It also leaves the tutors in a kind of career dead end with no prospect

of promotion at present within the College or probably in other colleges where their posts may be seen as at a lower level.

Both the tutors evinced a genuine passion for the FLC. They would like to see it expanded with more staff and more courses. Yusef would like to see its approach to learning widened out to other subject areas and would like to see it as a centre to support learners in other subject areas. Both would like to see its profile raised and believed that there is the possibility of making it central to work-based learning in the College as well as continuing its current role.

Yusef's vision for the FLC was to expand into other subject areas by making the Centre somewhere where online learners

> …come to the Centre to have human contact with the tutor or human interaction because one of the problems of the online learning on its own is the lack of human interaction and not everything can be done online. We could have the same, we could have collaboration with other flexible learning centres, and students can drop in at any centre.

This conceptualises the Centre as a physical space for tutor-learner interaction and collaboration between centres, something which does not happen at present. He also envisaged marketing the FLC to specific groups of learners and offering courses to learners who needed IT skills for other mainstream courses.

Jim saw a practical need for marketing as most people did not know this type of learning centre existed:

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We should be being sold to small businesses as this place that they can send their employees to at a time that suits them. We should have a much higher profile within the College Guide on the website and even in the Lifestyle Guide, everywhere. We should arguably be the most marketed part of the College because we don't have that ready sort of batch of learners who are going to be queuing up for most of the other courses every August.

There are still people in this local area who don't know what we do, who don't know that Hollypark College has a flexible learning centre where they can come and study at their own pace at their own time and I've had local residents saying that since I started, as recently as last month.

Conclusion

The tutors have a very distinct identity which is different from other staff in the College. For the tutors, the FLC is a place which is not recognised by many in the College and in the surrounding communities. This is something they would like to rectify. They both see it as providing a life-transforming experience to the learners and they have a sense of mission in what they do. What is happening in the learners' lives seems to them to transcend the mere acquisition of skills and the fostering of employability.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Introduction

In this chapter I reflect on how far the research met the original aims and answered the original questions. I look at the current Scottish policy update on skills and discuss what I consider is the importance of the contribution of the FLC.

The Research Aims and Questions

To recapitulate, the general aim of the research was to address a gap in knowledge about Further Education College flexible learning centres and their contribution to lifelong learning by illuminating the learning culture of Hollypark College Flexible Learning Centre in the context of the lifelong learning and employability and skills policy agendas. The data was rich enough to illuminate what coming to the Centre meant for individuals and certain categories of learners and to illustrate very clearly that the FLC tutors while attempting to address demands to improve learners' employability also recognise and celebrate learners whose objective is not employment. In this, there is perhaps a link to earlier discourses of lifelong education reflected in UNESCO's vision of education in the 21st Century as the complete fulfilment of man (UNESCO Task force for Education in the 21st Century 1999). The issue of learning for retired learners and others who are not seeking employment is one which is likely to be more contentious in a time of cuts to education budgets.

The research questions attempted to link employability to issues of identity and how tutors and learners viewed their learning. The final question, however, *How do FLC learners view their learning and how does it relate to the rest of their lives?* was perhaps over-ambitious as longer and more detailed life histories and biographies would have been needed to answer this through several interviews rather than one relatively short interview. It was probably partially answered but only a longitudinal study could really have answered it completely.

The way in which learners viewed their learning varied but it emerged that the FLC provided opportunities to learn successfully within the uniquely challenging context for older learners which acquiring computing skills presents, even for those who had failed elsewhere. The FLC seemed to, as Villa puts it in the context of schools:

> …vindicate personal characteristics of the students, motivating and incentivising them to perform as autonomous individuals who are responsible for their own growth (Villa 2009: 509).

Such individuals can clearly perform better in the workplace also and thus the FLC is fostering employability but others may also maintain lives which have become unstructured or difficult as Schuller et al suggest (Schuller et al 2002: v). By any standards, this is a valuable role both in terms of the economy and of combating exclusion.

To understand how this happened and where the difference was from conventional courses, I found that I was moving beyond the original questions and looking at other questions including what was the distinctive nature of the learning culture and why it seemed to work for older learners, the role and identities of the lecturers as compared with mainstream lecturers and the possible future of the Centre. The original questions were therefore extended by the issues which emerged from the data and possible answers provided.

The reflexivity which taking part in the research process involved was a very important learning process for me and for the first time I had to undertake what Bourdieu refers to as 'a self socio-analysis (in so far as that is ever possible)' (Bourdieu 1993: 49) to understand my own role in the process.

The Research Findings

The study tried to answer the questions using identity in Biesta's sense derived from Bourdieu as 'the dispositions people have towards themselves' (Biesta 2008b: 3). Biesta in his summary of the results of the Learning Lives Research Project has identified the following major implications about learning:

- Learning can help people with the processes of routine living
- Learning can help people adjust to changed circumstances
- Learning can provide valuable knowledge or skills for particular purposes, including employment and career change
- Learning can contribute to changing self-identity
- Learning can contribute to the achievement of agency
(Biesta 2008b: 3).

I would argue that although all of these implications may apply, for those interviewed the second last point about learning contributing to changing self-identity is particularly relevant. At first glance there is perhaps nothing surprising about this, and other FE lecturers could claim the same for their courses but where I think there is a surprise is that these changes were made over relatively short periods of time. This may well be because the FLC encapsulates something which Biesta sees as essential for successful learning, a specialised kind of support which

> …includes but goes far beyond teaching. Good support requires adaption to personal circumstances and situations, and the building of valued relationships (Biesta 2008b: 3).

Personal circumstances can be accommodated in the FLC as they cannot in mainstream courses and this in itself makes dropping out less likely. However, it seems to me that the real key to the success of the FLC is the building of valued and even quite intimate relationships between learners and tutors which would not be possible in the pressurised world of the conventional IT course. Every narrative told by the interviewees by its very personal content revealed the significance of the relationships established. I have reflected on this possible dissolving of the boundaries between the learners' home lives and their FLC lives which does not normally occur in other areas of the College and can be critiqued as undesirable (Ecclestone 2007: 11). It would not be feasible or perhaps desirable in other college learning cultures but in a way it is another example of the learners being treated more equally as adults, as whole people who choose how much or how little they wish to reveal of themselves. As

suggested before, the intention is not to provide therapy or to deprive them of agency, but to enable them to create horizons and to move forward.

Bourdieu's concept of adaptation (Bourdieu 1993) was particularly helpful in understanding how coming to the FLC enabled individuals to build their ability to develop this power and to move from being trapped in unemployment with non-transferable skills or trapped in the home or trapped in confining circumstances such as being carers or retired. This increase in adaptation and its consequent impact on dispositions and identity can be seen clearly in one example. As already mentioned, some of the women were initially in a subordinate position to their husbands or partners with relation to the home computer. For the women who gained IT skills in the Centre, however, this position could be challenged and their status with their children changed. In one case the woman gained a new independence which enabled her to speak about computer-related matters in company where before she would have been silent so that from being a silent person trapped in domesticity she gained a voice and an altered identity. Gaining IT skills also of course enabled learners to acquire an essential skill for 21st Century life, to build up the cultural capital which could enable them to be players in the field of work and help to overcome a real fear some expressed of workplaces dominated by the young.

The Positioning of the FLC

Villa has explored the possible meanings of flexibility and raises these questions about Higher Education institutions, '…flexibility in the interests of whom and for what purposes? Flexibility in relation to what?' (Villa 2009: 509). Bourdieu's concept of field has been alluded to earlier as helpful in analysing the learning culture of the FLC and this was particularly useful in understanding how the Centre was structured and in whose interests it operated.

I accept that the FLC is, in common with other learning cultures, 'constructed and reconstructed through the forces of one or more fields' (James and Biesta 2007: 28). Overlapping fields which affected the educational structure included the field of the government-controlled Learndirect centres. It was primarily to gain Learndirect branding that the Centre adopted its 50 week year in contrast to the rest of the College. In adopting this, it helped the government reach targets of creating a certain number of learning centres by the simple expedient of branding those which already existed in colleges. However, the pledge of learning when, where and how the learner wants which was made as a Learndirect centre was always more aspirational than realistic. This flexibility is clearly in the interests of the learners but may not be in the interests of managers of the College who have to justify provision on cost grounds alone. With government policy concentrating on the young, flexibility for the FLC's

unrepresented and individual learner cohort may simply be seen as expendable as not in the interests of maximising the College's finances.

The Centre can also be affected by the forces of other fields which its learners encounter. Some of the learners, for example, found their flexibility constrained by the rules imposed by Jobcentres which limited the number of hours they could study. These learners expressed anger at not being able to operate agency here and clearly felt their habituses marked them off from many of the claimants they saw at the Jobcentre. They wished to avail themselves of the temporal flexibility of the Centre but found the restrictive forces of being a jobseeker claimant militated against this.

An interesting feature of the FLC was how it is positioned in relation to the academic field of the College as a whole. The College has its own Award Ceremony for those from mainstream courses who may receive awards for academic excellence or perhaps, in the case of learners with learning disabilities, for working hard. On one or two occasions the Centre proposed learners for these awards but they were reluctant to attend as they did not feel part of the larger field of the College. Learners, however, turned out in large numbers along with family and friends annually for the FLC's own Celebration of Learning. This mirrors in its recounting of individual stories and bestowal of certificates what happens in the College-wide ceremony, but is held in the Centre's own space and arranged by its own staff. This ceremony reinforces

that the FLC has its own values and confers its own accolades on those deemed successful by the tutors.

Within the field of the FLC the learners built up social and cultural capital with several interlocking networks of learners. These networks may also have played a part in affecting learners' dispositions towards learning as this social aspect was clearly important and perhaps significantly there was no indication that most desired to move outside the FLC to pursue further learning. Perhaps the most important feature was that it offered the opportunity for adults to interact with adults and maintain their identities as adults while learning. The language used by the tutors was seen by those who had been in mainstream FE classes as distinct, treating learners as adults rather than children according to Grace. Here she was positioning the FLC learning culture in contrast to the mainstream learning culture she had experienced which was aimed at mainly younger learners.

In the case of the tutors there was a clash between the values of the professional field of lecturer education and the type of work which they did in the Centre. It could be argued that Jim and Yusef had developed a tutor identity which was different from their colleagues in the traditional mainstream classrooms, dependent as it was on constructing very close, personal relationships with the adult learners. There is also an argument that the field of the FLC can afford to foster such relationships because the tutors do not have

to impose an external locus of control on their learners as there is no class as such to 'manage'.

The Policy Context: The Lifelong Skills Strategy and the FLC

The whole feasibility of operating a flexible learning centre in a world of economic crisis and cutbacks is another question raised by the study. Villa analyses the idea of flexible delivery thus:

> The idea of flexible delivery in education may have two variants: it might refer to an educational environment in which individualism and unlimited choices are the values which finally determine the way of delivering education through a competitive market of educational processes and products; or it might allude to those social ends seeking to improve the access to education and to democratize the teaching and learning processes by increasing control over learning on the part of the students (Villa 2009: 500-501).

It seems to me that the FLC does reflect a focus on individualism characterised by the learner using his/her Individual Learning Account to buy learning but at the same time it was founded with the social end in view of enabling more people to access education and be included in society by widening their access to IT. This has resulted, in generating what Villa describes as 'new relations in time and space for pedagogic practice' (Villa 2009: 500). The research has shown that the particular people who benefit most from this are older learners with commitments as carers or people seeking instant and sustained structure in their lives for whom temporal flexibility is crucially important

As I was writing the final version of this chapter, the Scottish Government

published an Update on its Lifelong Skills Strategy (Scottish Government

2010). This update summarised the aims of the Strategy thus:

> The Strategy set out three major areas in which change was required: a focus on individual development, a response to the needs of the economy and the demands of employers and the creation of cohesive structures.

This illustrates that the familiar employer-led, economy-led model is still driving

the skills agenda in Scotland and looking at the Update, the older person

seems to be ignored once again. The Strategy was the subject of a debate in

the Scottish Parliament on 28 January 2010 led by Keith Brown, the Minister for

Skills and Lifelong Learning. Brown stressed:

> A key priority group for the Government, the Parliament and the country is, of course, our young people. Too often in previous recessions, young people have suffered most and the effects have continued for them while the rest of society has moved on. Scotland's young people deserve better. We are determined not to repeat that past mistake (Scottish Parliament 2010).

No one could disagree with these sentiments but I would suggest that the

demographics should not be ignored either. David Whitton MSP made the

following point about the age of the population, drawing on statistics from Skills

Development Scotland (2010):

> We must accept that Scotland faces demographic changes that will have an impact on its labour market. More than 20 per cent of the working-age population are aged 16 to 25, compared with 29 per cent who are aged 50 to 64. We need to motivate individuals to make use of the enhanced work and life opportunities that lifelong learning can bring them. Having the confidence and skills to participate and succeed has its own rewards.

I believe that the research shows that the FLC offers life opportunities to the older learners who are growing in numbers. The requirement is not to motivate these learners but to accommodate the needs of these learners. It is worth reiterating that the Cabinet Office report *Winning the Generation Game* pointed out in 2000 that classroom based training for IT skills for older learners in large-scale, classroom-based training programmes has been particularly unsuccessful. I would suggest that the FLC approach answers the report's plea that ways should be found of structuring learning for older learners, particularly in relation to IT skills. In the longer term, perhaps, there could be a refocusing of purpose and training which could lead to a recognition of the importance of learning and teaching in this particularly challenging area operating more flexibly. As previously mentioned, *Skills for Scotland* (Scottish Government 2007b;25) acknowledges in its one mention of older learners that there will be a 'greater demand for part-time and accelerated study options' The FLC provides an option which marries the provision of IT skills within a context of self-optimisation supported in a way which facilitates agency.

In a recent paper on Curriculum for Excellence, the major new initiative for education in Scotland, (HMIe 2010: 1) the Inspectorate summed up what they see as the role of colleges:

> In their *Mission statements* all of Scotland's colleges refer, in some way, to their commitment to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners. To maximise inclusivity, they and their partners deliver their curriculum flexibly, in terms of mode and location of attendance, programme design and approaches to learning, teaching and assessment.

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I believe that this statement exaggerates the flexibility offered by colleges and that the flexibility of the FLC is the exception to the rule in Scottish FE. I believe also that the learners made clear that acquiring IT skills brings special challenges which this learning culture accommodates. Selwyn (2003) argues that the use of information technology is not so 'societally ubiquitous' as it may be in the lives of middle-class commentators yet those who cannot use it are increasingly excluded and disadvantaged. The FLC therefore makes a very important contribution to inclusivity and this should be highlighted as much as its contribution to fostering employability.

<u>Final Reflection</u>

At the end of this case study I would like to return to Stake's conclusion about case study research:

> Because it is an exercise in such depth, the study is an opportunity to see what others have not yet seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretive powers, and to make even by its integrity alone, an advocacy for those things we cherish (Stake 1995: 136).

I have come to realise that the learning culture of the FLC is something which has evolved but has not been visible even within the field of the College yet although a product of policy thinking in the 1990s the FLC approach has something important to contribute in any debate on the future of lifelong learning in the 21st Century. I have tried to develop my interpretive powers to the best of my ability to understand and illuminate this learning culture by presenting and commenting on the words of learners and tutors who normally

would never be represented. This seems to me to have revealed a learning culture where

> …teaching and learning are not two distinct activities, but intertwined elements of a single, reciprocal process, or, if you like, the two sides of one coin; perhaps they could be described as a double-sided, interactive process which transforms both tutor and learner (Coffield 2008: 8).

My own habitus has meant that I have found myself acting as an advocate for the Centre where such transformation takes place but I believe that advocacy is based on an in-depth exploration of the learners' and tutors' views which I hope readers can examine and use for their own conclusions.

In our present world, a world where we are threatened with cuts at all levels of education, the FLC learning culture may at first glance seem a luxury colleges cannot afford. However, if one message emerges from this study it is that for the learners who shared their feelings about the Centre, attending the FLC brought benefits which cannot be measured in monetary terms or described purely in terms of employability. In recognising this, there is a strong argument for actually increasing this kind of IT learning provision to accommodate those learners for whom truly flexible learning opportunities are not an indulgence but a necessity if they are to succeed. Only by doing this, will we realise the ambition of enabling all our citizens to be part of the digital society and include in our vision of the future, the older learners who are so often ignored.

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APPENDIX 1 :
PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE FLEXIBLE LEARNING CENTRE

APPENDIX 2 :
OBSERVATION FIELD NOTES 20 SEP 2006

1 Background Information

This is really near the start of the college year and enrolment was a feature of this session. Formerly, there used to be separate times for enrolment with tutors timetabled for this, but with only two tutors, Jim and Yusef, this is not a possibility. There are issues of confidentiality in holding interviews within earshot of others and problems with lack of a designated space for ECDL tests.

Time 11.00

The learning centre tutors are timetabled for 21 hours class contact per week but although Jim was the designated tutor on duty, Yusef also appeared to do enrolments and give him a brief break. It is not clear whether this is the usual practice or was specially arranged as they knew the observation was taking place. I sat down at the empty large table, not too sure where to sit.

Yusef, interviewed two new learners, one of whom had been told about the centre by a friend and one who had seen a leaflet and offered other assistance to learners.

2 Learners and Learning Environment

At the start of the observation 15 learners were present plus one new learner being interviewed. 5 were male and 10 were female. Several learners were ethnic minority learners.

Jenny, the learning centre assistant, took the new learners to help them complete the form after enrolment.

Two learners left just as I arrived and one came in.

It was quiet in the actual learning area but background noise from the reception desk was quite intrusive. (I had an immediate dilemma – do I react to this as the manager or forget my managerial role as observer. I decided to ignore it)

Most learners looked to be in their forties or fifties with one young learner and one quite elderly lady.

The atmosphere in the centre was purposeful but relaxed with tutors interacting in a friendly and encouraging way with the learners. One ethnic minority female learner sat alone at the window. Other learners were distributed around the learning area with enough space to work with the large folders used and enough space to give reasonable privacy.

Yusef sat at a desk working on course materials for part of the time. Several interactions seemed to be initiated by Jim walking round and learners then attracting his attention. One male learner got up and went over to the desk to ask Yusef questions. (Do learners need proximity to gain confidence to ask the tutor?)

In general, learners worked alone, but the two ECDL learners worked together and a male learner who came in towards the end worked with the learner beside him. Social interaction took place between the ECDL learners, the two

A4

men at the window computer, two female learners (one of whom left before the other) and between the receptionist Jenny and learners as they entered and left. Two learners at the back, the ethnic minority learner in the middle and the man who asked if he could use his laptop and the younger learner in the middle did not speak to any other learners. Only the two at the back seemed to have no interaction with the tutors.

3   My location

I was not sure where to sit and felt awkward sitting at a table where interviews took place as there was a feeling of loss of privacy for the interviewee.

4   Yusef Interactions

    a. Enrolment interview   5 minutes

    b. Response to question   2 mins

    c. Chat with learner who approached desk   2 mins

    d. Yusef at folders approached by Sage learner to ask how to print cheques. Explained for 3 mins

    e. Female learner assisted   3 mins

    f. Yusef spoke to female learner at window about health and safety courses   2 mins

    g. Yusef explained to female learner about mistake made using capital lock. Sat down to demonstrate   2 mins

    h. Asked older learner how he was getting on   30 secs

i.   Enrolment interview 2 with ethnic minority learner   5 mins

j.   Helped young learner   5 mins

k.   Sage learner identified error in course and entered into dialogue

      with Yusef who attempted to explain   3 mins

l.   Sage learner went over to Yusef at desk. Laughter in interaction

      2 mins

m.   Helped male learner who had not previously asked for help   1.5

      mins

n.   Sage learner questioned part of the course   2 mins

o.   Returned to Sage learner   2 mins

p.   Spoke to learner who had just arrived and asked wrong learner to

      leave computer for her   1 minute

In an hour period Yusef carried out two interviews and had interactions with 9 other learners. One learner, the Sage learner, accounted for nearly one third of the interactions. This raises a point about allocation of tutor time and help received. Ask and you will receive! But what if reluctant to ask?

5 Jim Interactions

a.   Explained PowerPoint to one female learner   3 mins

b.   Explained ECDL test to 2 female learners who worked together

      4 mins

c.   Sat down with PowerPoint learner to demonstrate point 3 mins

d.   Spoke to young learner who had been emailing   3 mins

e.   Explained to Sage learner about paper sizes and format.

       Helped with printing   5 mins

f.   Explained further to ECDL learners about practice tests.

       Advised on ECDL books   5 mins

g.   Signed sheet for leaving learner

h.   Walked round and explained to female learner who had not

       previously asked for help   2 mins

i.   Sat down with learner to complete enrolment process and took

       to desk   4 mins

Jim had less interactions than Yusef although several were of longer duration.

6   Interactions in five minute observation periods schedule

0-5 minutes
Two learners left, saying goodbye to the tutor. A new learner was enrolled at the table where I was sitting by Yusef. Made joke of giving learner a pen to bring to the centre. Two learners left, saying goodbye to the tutor. A new learner was enrolled at the table where I was sitting by Yusef. Made joke of giving learner a pen to bring to the centre.
6-10 minutes
Jim explained a PowerPoint application to one female learner. Another learner asked Yusef a question.

Two learners came in and moved a chair to sit at one computer. They requested an ECDL CD from Jim. One asked about sitting the test for module 1. Jim explained the test.
11-15 minutes
Yusef sat down at the desk and was approached by a learner who had come into the centre. Interaction was very friendly. Yusef was at the folders when a very vociferous English learner asked him about printing a cheque. Jim sat down with a learner to explain when she had a difficulty with PowerPoint. Explanations were given in a quiet but confident tone. Jim left the learning centre while Yusef spoke to another learner and explained in a hands on way what was to be done. Jenny continued to interview the new learner and deal with phone calls.
16-20 minutes
One learner was accessing email and ebay which subsequently appeared to be part of a course. Jim spoke to learner. The same learner who had approached Yusef for help approached Jim. He advised on type of paper to copy cheques and helped with the printing. Yusef sat at the desk. The two learners asked about the ECDL test again. Jim explained about practice tests and time for test. Two female learners had a chat as one left. The learner then had a chat with Jenny at the desk.

21-25 minutes
Jim advised about books on ECDL to the two collaborative learners, one of whom seemed to be American.
One learner returned to have her sheet signed off by Jim who was still talking to the two learners.
Yusef helped a female learner.
The learner who had left returned to speak to her friend.
26-30 minutes
Yusef spoke to an ethnic minority learner at the window.
One male learner went to the toilet.
Jenny continued to interview new learner.
Learner who was leaving continued to talk quietly to her friend and left.
Jim left the learning area.
Yusef sat at the desk working on course.
31-35 minutes
Jenny came in with the new learner and showed her the folders.
The learner who had gone to the toilet returned with a drink of water.
Yusef showed a female learner that she had been hitting cap lock by mistake.and showed her what to do. Yusef sat down beside her and laughed with her.
Yusef sat at the computer beside her.
The two learners continued to work collaboratively on ECDL.
New learner left.

Only sound from typing tutor.

Yusef advised learner to speak to Janice about health and safety course.

Yusef asked older learner how he was getting on.

Yusef went to desk and Jenny asked Yusef question about new learner.

Ethnic minority learner came in for preliminary interview. Said she wanted to do

FrontPage. Doing ECDL in college.

Name
Address

July 1 2007

Dear ……

FLEXIBLE LEARNING CENTRE RESEARCH PROJECT

I would like to invite you to help us to improve our service at the Flexible Learning Centre by allowing me to interview you. The interview will be very informal and will be confidential.

I am the manager at Hollypark College with overall responsibility for the LITEhouse and I hope that what I learn from the interviews can help us to improve our service to learners.

I am studying for a research doctorate degree at Stirling University and am now in my fourth year. I hope to interview learners from this year's Celebration of Learning ceremony.

What I am interested in, is hearing about your learning stories. I hope to find out why you chose to learn here, how you view this type of learning and if coming to the centre helps you if you are looking for a job or has other benefits.

<u>Interview Information</u>
- I will hold interviews, which will usually last no longer than one hour, in my office in the Hollypark Building. I plan to hold the interviews in late summer/early autumn but could do them later in the year if this would be more suitable for you.
- The interview will be confidential and your real name will not appear in anything written as a result of the interview.
- Information from the interview will be included in a report which may be published later. I will send everyone interviewed a summary of the report and if you wish,the final version.
- If you want to withdraw from taking part you can do this at any time.

If you are willing to be interviewed, I will phone you in the week beginning July 30th so that you can ask me any questions about the research and we can arrange an interview time. If you would prefer not to be phoned at home, you can email me and let me know when you might be able to come in to be interviewed. My email address is eadams @langside.ac.uk

If you feel you don't wish to be interviewed, please phone Jenny at the Flexible Learning Centre before the 30th and let her know so that I will not bother you with a

phone call. (I am away on holiday from July 8th until July 27th and so have asked Jenny to take any calls for me.)

I do hope you will agree to take part and I look forward to talking to you.

Yours sincerely

Evelyn Adams
Head of Learning Development

APPENDIX 4:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Learner Interview Questions

Question 1.
What can you remember about your first day at primary school?

Question 2
What are your strongest memories of primary school?

Question 3
Tell me about your secondary school. How did you feel about your school?

Question 4
Tell me about any courses you went to in colleges or universities after leaving school.

Question 5
Please tell me about anything which happened in your life which made you go to the FLC.

Question 6
Please tell me what happened on your first visit to the FLC and how you felt.

Question 7
Can you tell me how long you have been coming to the centre and what you have been doing in the centre.

Question 8
Tell me about what sort of impact coming to the centre has made to your life.

Question 9
Tell me how you felt about receiving an award as a learner.

Question 10
Tell me about how you get on with the tutors in the centre.

Question 11
Tell me how you get on with Jenny and Janice (the reception staff).

Question 12
Tell me about any other learners you know or speak to in the centre.

Question 13
What are your future plans when you finish what you are doing at the FLC?

Tutor Interview Questions

Question 1.
Can you tell me a bit about how you come to be working at the Flexible Learning Centre?

Question 2
What is your own experience of education and how has that influenced you in how you think about education?

Question 3
We always refer to FLC teaching staff as tutors and other teaching staff in the college as lecturers. Can you tell me what difference you see between the role of FLC tutor and subject lecturer in the college?

Question 4
Tell me what challenges you face with learners.

Question 5
Tell me what gives you most satisfaction about working in the FLC.

Question 6
Tell me what gives you least satisfaction.

Question 7
Tell me about what criteria you use in deciding which learners will receive awards at our Celebration of Learning.

Question 8
Tell me about what you think are the main reasons which bring learners to the centre.

Question 9
Can you tell me how you see flexible learning centres fitting into college structures as a whole?

Question 10
Can you tell me about any way you think government policies have affected the development of the FLC?

Question 11
If you had the resources to make big changes in the FLC, what would you do?

Question 12
Tell me about how you think the centre should be marketed.

Question 13
What are your hopes for the centre in the future?

TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH JOBSEEKER

Interview Transcript: Grace (Jobseeker)

August 6 2007: 11.00-11.59

Question 1.

Evelyn: *What can you remember about your first day at primary school?*
Grace: *Yes. I cried the whole day because my Mum never put us into nursery or anything and I was used to being with her every day and I remember she put me in the class and then when she walked away I just cried until she came to dinner time to get me. After a couple of days I settled in fine but I think there's a difference between going to nursery and then school rather than being at home for five years and then being put into school.*

Evelyn: *So that would be quite a traumatic experience then?*
Grace: *Yeah. I just remember the teacher Miss McInnes saying "Grace, turn off the waterworks." I'm 46 and I still remember that.*
I know all my nieces and nephews have went to nurseries and they went into school fine whereas my Mum never sent... there weren't as many nurseries then anyway in those days I don't think.

Question 2.

Evelyn: *What are your strongest memories of primary school?*
Grace: *Em… I really enjoyed primary school. I remember in your first class stupid things like your wee bottle of milk and you got a biscuit and things like that and my friend Moira didn't drink milk so I had to drink hers, empty my bottle and give her mine so she wouldn't get a row.*
No, I just remember enjoying everyone's company at playtime.
I remember in primary we used to have these cards we worked off and I can't remember what they were called, I don't remember if it was RSA, I'm not sure. There was a box beside the teacher and they had all different coloured labels and you would work your way through them and I remember enjoying that.
Em... just being out in the playground playing at rounders with the teacher and things.
I still remember all the wee coloured bricks we got. White was number 1 and 10 was orange – all these silly wee things but I loved primary and I hated secondary and I never settled into secondary.

Question 3.
Evelyn: *Tell me about your secondary school. How did you feel about your school?*
Grace: *I don't know if it was because it was all your same friends and the one teacher and then you were in different classes and you never really got to know the teachers very well.*
And there was a bit of bullying going on at school from some of the girls who came from a slightly rougher area and I think because I didn't enjoy school and the fear of being bullied in first year… my attention span… I felt I never did well at school.
Years later when I worked in the educational offices and used to see all the results coming in Kingswood Secondary was a lot better than Queen's Drive Secondary which thankfully no longer exists. They've built flats there, they've demolished it.

But I just never liked secondary at all. I couldn't wait to leave and I left with no qualifications at all. I think I got a D and an E and I think that was a lot to do with… I think my learning has started since I left school but not at school...I didn't do well at school at all.

Evelyn: *So the school's gone. That must be quite a good feeling?*
Grace: *When I drive by I just think I wish they'd done that when I went there in 1974. So I wish I'd gone to Kingswood Secondary; they had a lot better results. They seemed to do more.*

Evelyn: *Do you think the teachers had given up or what?*
Grace: *I don't know. There were some really nice teachers but it was the others ones that were in your class and I also felt because you weren't clever academically there were maybe some classes you were in whereas you had really people who were worse than you and the teachers didn't bother the same because they felt you just weren't interested in learning.*

Evelyn: *So it was that business of streaming people?*
Grace: Uh huh. I remember my first class was 1M4 and my pal Moira went into 1B or something and I hated being split from her but Moira was academically more clever than me. And all through the four years we were never together, Moira was always higher up. I think it just doesn't do your confidence any good either.
And I was unemployed for ten months after I left school, obviously due to my lack of qualifications. And what used to bug me was that the boys went straight into school to the shipyard – they had jobs lined up for them whereas girls didn't. They didn't… there was no trades or big firms to take anyone on.

Evelyn: *So the secondary was a pretty negative experience then?*
Grace: *Well they were taking money off you in the toilets. You would wait till lunchtime so you ran from home four times a day. Everybody gets taken to school in cars these days – we walked.*
I just wouldn't take money in then because you were too scared these girls would take money off you. So I just wouldn't go and you made sure you left to go to the toilet before you went back at lunchtime because you knew you wouldn't get back and we were in school to four o'clock then… and you just, you just ran everywhere.
I just didn't like it. In fact I saw one of the bullies the other day and I saw her coming out of Iceland and I says to her," That female was in the same year as me at Queen's Drive." And my sister says, "I think I've seen her face before". I says, "I think her name's Linda but I'm no sure but I would know her face anywhere."

Evelyn: *You know I actually think I've heard of Queen's Drive. I had a cousin who did supply teaching and he left after one day.*
Grace: *I'm no surprised. I actually played truant because my Mum and Dad hadn't a clue. I would wait until my Mum went out to her wee cleaning job and when I saw her going out I would go back into the house and I got caught because they came to the door twice. So I just found secondary really hard. There's four years between my sister and brother and four years between my brother and I – so there were never any older members at school – they'd left when I started. You never even had anybody to go to..so you just had to get on with it. Aye.*

Question 3.

Evelyn: *Tell me about any courses you went to in colleges or universities after leaving school.*
Grace: *No , I just signed on at the unemployment office and eventually they set me up with the Careers Office with an interview at a surveyor's office at Charing Cross and I worked there from 78 tae 81 when I was made redundant, They closed the Glasgow office down and moved it to Edinburgh and I was unemployed for 18 months after that.*

Evelyn: *So you were there 3 years and it closed down. That must have been quite a blow as well.*
Grace: *It was. Well, I was just a receptionist and junior, but I enjoyed the job and the surveyors and the girls in the office and that. But once they closed it down, you've no choice in the matter. Once they moved to Edinburgh I couldn't possibly go with them. And they never lasted long through there; they went into liquidation.*

Evelyn: *So after that, what did you do after that, Grace?*

Grace: *I did temporary work. My friend got me into Boots the Chemist… no I did 7 months temporary in the Sun Alliance insurance office in St Vincent St but it was only temporary. Em, and then '84 I think it was, I got a temporary job in Boots, working in the shop and then they moved us out to the warehouse to sort out all the Christmas stock.*
1986 was the best – that was when I started in the education offices. And I was there until '92 when I went to the police.

Evelyn: *That was a long time.*
Grace: *Yes and then I was made redundant from the police last March.*

Evelyn: *Why was that? Surely…*
Grace: *The story we heard was that one of the Assistant Chief Constables decided to copy the forces down south and close their Inquiry Unit. The Inquiry Unit had been running for over 30 years… and… we were warned about this over a period of about two years or so but we never thought that it would actually happen. But we were all warned and taken down and spoke to by Personnel and told "There are gonna be jobs but they're different from the job you do. Are there any other places you're interested in?"*
So I'd asked for a Monday to Friday day shift job but I'd asked for Dumbarton, Clydebank or Partick police office because I lived in Knightswood but they never once offered me anything although I'd an excellent time-keeping record and I was really disappointed in that.
The people in the shift who stayed on, there's been two or three went off long term with stress. They've been off over 14 months because they weren't given the proper training for the job and you're having tae go tae court to give evidence because all the lines are taped so I'm glad I left but I'm really mad that after fourteen years… you saw people in the job do wrong, people would get their knuckles rapped and moved to another division. They're still in the job and you think, "I never did anything wrong and you couldn't find me a dayshift job out of all these police offices."
You really feel hurt and Louise, my pal that I come with, she's got 27 years service. Louise's no looking for a full time job, she's only looking for part-time but we've both applied to the police and we've both got knock backs.
And that's really making me mad.
We put up with a lot of training – all the training that you gave us and we can't work elsewhere now because all we did was check criminal records and cards and that's no use to you other than in a police environment.
And all the employers are looking for this ECDL and at the age of 46 you've to come back out and learn. I thought I'd a job for life until I retired. So I'm really…
I actually job-shared for 7 and a half years of the 14 because my Mum and Dad took ill and my Dad was eventually diagnosed with cancer of the stomach and pancreas so he died after 22 months and I only went back full time 15 months before we were made redundant because one of the girls went off to have her second baby and she said, "Grace, I'd find it too hard doing… You always

worked 7 day shifts the same as the police officers. Can I have your job sharing contract and you can keep my full time." So I knew we were getting paid off anyway so for the last 15 months I just did the 7 days.

But I just feel really angry about it. We were out at a friend's the other night and we heard there's an underlying policy though it's not in writing that the police are not to re-employ any more civilians. But not just the Inquiry Unit- any civilian who works for the police and yet a police officer can stop one day as a cop and start the next day as a civvy. And they're leaving with a huge lump sum and a good pension. It's like one set of rules for cops and one set of rules for civvies. But there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. But now you start to think, would I go and work for them again? I'm so angry about it. Louise got a pension and a lump sum and she cleared her mortgage but I'm surviving off £59.15 a week unemployment benefit. So it's just really galling to find yourself in this position and their way out of it is to say, "You'd a chance to go through to the control room to that other job". I'm glad I never went, Evelyn, because they're all off with stress.

Evelyn: I'm not surprised. To appear in court and give evidence is really a traumatic thing.
Grace: I know. I'm no putting up with that.

Evelyn: So you were thrown from what you thought was a job for life, suddenly it all fell apart. It must be really really difficult to cope with it.
Grace: It is because we'd just moved into this house a month when my Mum took ill and she was ill for a few months with TB and ulcers burst in her leg and the week the nurses stopped coming to my Mum my Dad took ill. We thought it was... but it was a massive tumour which had spread. So when I got my redundancy all my redundancy has gone in the house because it was an alcoholic's house and the whole house has had to be done. And the hall and the kitchen and the driveway's still to be done because my Mum's got scoliosis of the spine and she's fell on the stairs a few times so we're having to sell the house and move.

So I'm really mad because I've ended up with no money, scrimping and saving to get by, having to go back out and learn and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it.

So I feel this is the only way forward. I'm not really into computers but I know that's the way of the world and you've really got to get on with it. People say, "It should be easy, you worked with computers" but it's totally different – you're looking at people's records, DNA and fingerprints, it's nothing to do with admin. And this is what you're having to learn now.

Question 5.

Evelyn: You've really answered the next question did anything special happening in your life make you decide to go the FLC?

A19

Grace: *I know. I actually went to Northside College during the 7 and a half years I job shared but it was a class of about 30. The majority of them were teenagers though there were one or two older people and they were only interested in going on the internet and carrying on and I found I couldn't concentrate and I just decided … and I walked away after so many months without any certificates and I just thought, "I can't go there" so when Louise had went to a couple of colleges and she stays in Govan and she came over here and told me about it so we came over one day and I thought "It's such a quiet relaxed atmosphere. And Jim and Yusef are great and so's Jenny on the desk and so although it's a bit of a trek from Kingswood I'm glad because I really enjoy it and it gets me out the house and it's calming.*
And my sister's no well. She's had a lump removed from her foot and I have to collect her in the morning and take her up to my Mum to watch her and then take her back after we've had our dinner. She's no even had her stitches out.

Evelyn: *The course at Northside College, what was it?*
Grace: *It was to do with the ECDL. It was Word. I felt one of the tutors, she reminded me of someone I used to work with but she spoke to you as if she was a teacher in a school and I just didn't like it and she'd say things loud like, "What did you do that for?" And I felt like saying, "That's why I asked you to come over and help me. If I'd knew why I wouldn't have done it wrong. And I just felt she never made me feel at ease in the class. And I just thought, "I'm no enjoying this", so I walked away.*
And then later on when you're made redundant you wish you'd stuck at it because you might have had some qualification you could have fell back on.
So I bought a laptop off my redundancy so you can do it at home as well.

Evelyn: *So your mother, is she still ill?*
Grace: *She's 79 and she's deaf and she's got inoperable corneal ulcers and cataracts on top. So Gartnavel did one eye but it wasn't a success so they won't touch the other one. But she took ill last May – her bowel ruptured and she goes to bed every day at teatime. My sister's put in for a two bedroom flat because my mum's got the wheelchair and she needs somewhere on the level. So when we sell this place I need to look for a place on the level but I can't afford a bungalow.*
So I've got inconsiderate neighbours, I've had the police and environmental health so I'm just tearing my hair out just now and I want out. My sister's flat's very small so she really needs a two bedroomed. So it's just a bit o a mess just now.
And I've no had a holiday for 13 years. I'm absolutely scunnered and I'm looking at these postcards (postcards on the wall) saying "I'd love to go there; I'd love to go there."

Question 6.

Evelyn: *Please tell me about what happened on your first visit and how you felt. Did you come with your friend Louise?*
Grace: *Uh huh, the two of us came together. And I think it was Janice was on that day. She introduced us to Jim and Yusef and got us the forms and signed up and we got the £200 help from the ILA and we paid the £50. There were free places but by the time we joined there were none left so we just paid the £50 you know, but they're really helpful. It's a nice atmosphere but Northside had something like thirty computers in the class. There the way the desks are set out as well..I just liked, it was nice and quiet. I just really enjoy coming over – it's like a wee escape route from everything else. Yusef takes good care of the plants. We're always commenting on his nice flowers.*
But there's one or two younger ones come in but the majority are about our age or a bit older and I remember one day, it must have been teenagers from the library had to come down because their computers weren't working and you noticed they were there right away. The noise. They're only kids but that was when I says to Louise, "That's what it's like at Northside all the time" and I couldn't concentrate with all that.
I looked at the age group of the people who were learning there and I liked…I looked at how Yusef was walking about and they would call him over when they required help and I could hear how they were speaking to him and they weren't speaking to him as if they were children in a class. I just thought, me, I'd like to come here. So we signed up right away.
Jenny's great. She does an enormous amount of work there, especially with Janice being off such a long time. She said she worked for Scottish Power before.

Question 7.

Evelyn: *Can you tell me about how long you have been coming to the FLC and what you have been doing at the FLC?*
Grace: *Since last... I think it's the tenth of November. It's on our file. We completed Computers and the Internet for Beginners and then we started on the ECDL. And we were advised not to do number 1 first and we didn't listen and stupidly we were ready to hang ourselves because it's too technical for us. But we got through it and I'm glad number 1's out the way. And we passed number 3 recently so we're on number 4 spreadsheets. And I've heard 4 and 5 there's quite a lot to them but apparently 6 and 7 are quite short.*
We do it together, a wee bit of moral support. Because we felt totally out wur depth because although we worked with computers it's nothing like the work we're doing at the college. I think I missed that... coming with Louise. I know at Northside I felt totally out my depth. I didn't know anybody there, I thought, I'm no enjoying this, I thought if I had somebody come with me but Louise always worked full time at the police so I'd nobody to come with me.

We usually do four times a week. Monday to Thursday. I'm limited because I get unemployment benefit. You're not allowed to do more than 15 and a half hours a week, I believe. And it's ridiculous because when you go up every fortnight to sign on they say, "How's your job search going?" So they're hounding you to get a job but they're limiting you as to how many hours you're doing.
And I hate going up there because, God forgive me there's so many undesirable up there. They're coming up and they're junkies or they're drunk. I just hate it. But you need the money so you just have to go and sign for it – you've got tae go.

Question 8.

Evelyn: *Tell me about what sort of impact coming to the centre has made to your life.*
Grace: *For a start it gives me somewhere to go, somewhere to get up for in the morning instead of just hanging about the house. I feel I'm learning and hopefully I'll get a full time job one day. It's been nice meeting other people and I feel even when I complete the course and leave I could always phone them up if I'm worried about something and they'd be there on hand to help you.*

And I would advise anyone tae come here. I said that on the day of the awards. I think it's a great place to come. It's a lovely atmosphere. So… Northside's just five minutes away but I just wouldn't go there now.
If I get a job and have to learn say Finance, Sage I would come here at night. It's always the LITEhouse I would come back to. Even if it has to be at night, so be it, I'll come.

Evelyn: *Do you think it helps with your confidence as well?*
Grace: *Yes, I do. At least I feel if I go for interviews now at least I'll be able to speak on what I've been doing and what I'm learning and I'll make it clear that because it's flexible it's not gonnae stop me from going tae my work. I can still do it at night and at home.*
I know I have found it quite difficult going back tae learning at this age but I know at the end of the day you just have tae do it and I need to work for the next 14, 15 years. So I need to get a full time job and I need to get one quick.

Question 9.

Evelyn: *Tell me how you felt about receiving an award as a learner.*
Grace: *That was great. I says to Jenny when I got the letter, "I don't know if I'll manage because I have to sign on that day" and I wasn't sure then what time the awards were going to be because you can't be late for signing on. The way they look at it, you're unemployed, you can't be late for signing on.*

So then Jenny says, she goes "I've got to tell you then, you're getting an award. It would be really good if you could come and it'll be about twelve 'clock."
I says, "Oh, that's fine."
She says, "About an hour and a half to two hours."
I says, "Well as long as I leave about half an hour before I have to sign on to get back. I was just a bit embarrassed. I've never sat in a crowd and been applauded. Cos I says to Louise, "I don't want to do this," and Louise says, "Neither do I. Come on we'll run back oot." And then Jim went, "Hoi, you two."
No, I was pleased and it was nice to show my family that's where I'm going and that's what I'm doing. I think they think I'm goin roond the shops every day and just coming back, no doing anything so…No, it was nice and I've got them laminated so they won't be wasted.
It's nice to be recognised because I think Jim had said there's something like 300 odd flexible learning students and only 25 or 26 are getting awards, so it was nice to be in amongst that.
So…em…no, it was a nice day and a lovely lunch had been laid on and we got talking to some of the people we don't normally get speaking to and we've got friendly with one of the girls who's got really bad eyesight, Deirdre.
She's really nice and we're talking to her and she brought her cousin with her and we were speaking to one of the… where did he say he was from, was it Portugal? Carlos, and he's got cerebral palsy and his speech is quite hard to understand so we brought him over to our table and we were sitting talking to him and he was saying he was born in Portugal and where he'd lived and he'd been in Glasgow for 3 years and he loved it. But I haven't seen him recently. But it was just getting to talk to some of the people. It was a nice atmosphere.

Question 10.

Evelyn: *Tell me about how you get on with the tutors in the centre.*
Grace: *Their personalities are great. They're really patient. They explain things well. You can have a wee laugh with them.*

Question 11.

Evelyn: *Tell me how you get on with Jenny and Janice.*
Grace: *Jenny's really helpful. And I think she probably has been flung in at the deep end. Obviously with Janice being off. She looks sometimes really worn out and stressed but she just plods away and she always has a smile when you go in and she has a smile when you're leaving. She says to me the other day, "You left sweets but don't worry I made good use of them."*
I says, "You stole my sweets!"
She talks about her Mum. I think she goes to visit her Mum and she was talking about getting maybe a wee kitten.
But no, I always find her really helpful and on the odd occasion I wasn't able to come I phoned in so that the computer could go to someone else... to take my

name off, she always phones to see you're alright. Which is really… Pitt Street never phoned. They only wanted to know when you're coming back.
I says to her, "You don't have to phone, if I leave a message don't feel you have to phone."
She says, "No, no, no. I like to phone to make sure you're alright."
Because I remember one morning I never came because I realised I didn't have insurance for this loan my Mum and Dad and I had taken out at the time and I'd been fighting with the Clydesdale Bank until we discovered that the loan had been taken out against the property so for me to continue paying the loan, if I missed it they would force me to sell the house. And I couldn't so I've had to pay this loan and it's cleared now.
But I was really upset that morning and I phoned in tears. I cannae believe that guy... because we'd never bought a house before, a council house so you don't know what you're really talking about, mortgages. And my Mum and Dad and I signed for this loan and I didn't know they took £550 arrangement fee. And they'd arranged it against the house so I still had to pay the loan and my redundancy had gone by that point so I phoned Louise and said I can't go and then Jenny phoned the house and I thought, "I cannae tell her I've been bubbling."
But no, she's very caring and she'll pass the time of day with you but you can see she's always busy. I really do think she carries the place.

She was telling me she gave people all kinds of homoepathic remedies. She even wanted to give me something for stress last week.
She gave me a stress ball.

Question 12.

Evelyn: *Tell me about any other learners you know or speak to in the centre.*
Grace: *I've got to know Marianne quite well, one of the women, Marianne who comes, and I chat away to her. She was telling us she's doing ECDL but she's going back to number 1 because she hadn't done it. But no, we've been talking away to Marianne.*
One of the other girls, Jan, we've been talking to her. I think she's got three wee girls. Katherine – she's got two boys because she was saying one of her sons has learning difficulties. And through this centre she actually got lined up with a wee job in Millers in the city centre last year but because she has children at school she needs a job, a wee part-time job where she would get all the holidays off.
I says to her, "What about classroom assistants?" On that day when people came in, one of them, she was looking for someone for St Stephen's church but I think it was only twelve hours per week. Which was ideal for Katherine but, it was all through the year and she couldn't do it because of the children.
The only thing, one of the women who came in, she gave me her name, I've wrote it in the book, she was from Hollypark Housing. I was telling her how I've applied for Northside Housing but they got something like 300 odd applicants,

but one of the other women she took my email address and says "Grace, sometimes it's how you fill an application form in."
She goes, "I've got an excellent example." I think she was the head of a school. She says "I'll email it to you." She never did. Because I kept watching to see if it would come up.

Question 13.

Evelyn: *What are your future plans when you finish what you are doing at the FLC?*
Grace: *I've actually applied to Johnsburgh Housing in Paisley. They were looking for customer service assistants. I did get an acknowledgment back saying they'd be in touch. But that's about a fortnight ago and so I'm beginning to think… I know there would be people in those departments looking for promotion, at lower grades, so you know right away you've got that competition. They'll know by looking at my form that I have never worked in a housing office so I don't have any housing knowledge but I have worked in the education offices and in the police and you feel that should give you a good chance. But if they're looking for internal employees they know by law they must advertise but that's not to say they're going tae take an external person on rather than an internal.*
And I applied to West Lanarkshire Council – I've actually been trying to get in there for years and I applied for this job and as soon as I read it I knew it was exactly for me and I was qualified to do it and everything and the girl in the personnel office down there knows me as I'm always applying and they never even acknowledged the application and I never even got a letter saying you weren't being called for an interview and I knew I could do the job. And I actually felt like phoning up and complaining but at the same time you're scared you shoot yourself in the foot…
But it eats away at you and you think, "Well why advertise ? They've got tae advertise, Grace, it's the law," but you think, you took the time to fill in that form and they can't even take the time to send you a standard letter to tell you you're not getting an interview. At least let the person know so they know not to hang off waiting all the time.
It's horrible, because you start to think, "Am I ever going to get a job?"
After I was made redundant a job came up in SCRO over at Pacific Quay and we used to do SCRO and everything it said I could do and it was a temporary post and so the chap at the jobcentre copied it off and I filled it in and I got a letter saying I wasn't being called for interview and I thought, "They know where I work and what I've done." I thought the job was mine.
A couple of weeks later I went up again and the chap says, "Grace, was that no the job you applied for?" and I said "It is but I got a letter saying I didn't get it and he says, "They've just re-advertised it – it's permanent." So I was raging. The next morning, there's a letter from SCRO, Are you still interested in this job? We're advertising it in a permanent position – which I knew through the Jobcentre. If so could you please put it in writing. So I said I was still

interested and I never got an acknowledgement, no letter back – nothing. And this is where we think the underlying policy is that they're not re-employing civilians. I remember I was absolutely livid.
But this watching for the post and wondering if you're gonnae hear anything, it's just soul destroying.

TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH MOTHER MOVING TOWARDS WORK

Interview Transcript: Katherine
August 28 2007:10.59-11.59

Question 1.

Evelyn: *What can you remember about your first day at primary school?*
Katherine: *I can… I don't know the very first day… it gets all a bit vague but I certainly remember early in primary school… yes, we had a fantastic teacher, and I've come across her again recently, which was quite interesting. But no… no huge memory, just… I wasn't upset, I just went with the flow, kind of did what I was told.*

Question 2

Evelyn: *What are your strongest memories of primary school?*
Katherine: *I suppose like most during the seven years there was a mixed bag of teachers. Mainly good. I had overall a pleasant experience. I kind of sat in the middle of the class, I wasn't the cleverest, you know or the weakest.*
Daft things about primary school, you know nothing to do with learning is em…
I was a bit overweight as a child and as an only child didn't have any older brothers or sisters to kind of pave the way and I always kind of had the gym slip and the grey socks and the lacing shoes and my pal had the red cardigan and the white socks and the bar shoes and you know, that's it anyway.
But you know I had good friends and och, there's always daft wee stories but it's all kind of playground stories.

Evelyn: *Like what?*
Katherine: *Och, span round and round in a game and fell and grazed my nose and got made to stand outside the class because I was hitting this boy with a shoe and wouldn't stop.*

Evelyn: *Can you remember in that one why you were hitting him? Had he done something first?*
Katherine: *That's blanked. You know, it was wet weather, we were inside… it wasn't my normal behaviour. I think he was a perfectly nice boy, I think it was just... I don't know. I just don't know. And it was a green satin one.*

Evelyn: *What age was that? Was that quite early on? It sounds quite…*
Katherine: *Oh that would be primary one or two. The shame of being sent out the classroom sorted me.*
Em, but yes the school dance in primary seven. In fact I met him again yesterday, the practices for the school dances and my partner was a really

really lovely bloke but – two left feet! You know I remember him falling at my feet and I still know him. He's now a minister.

Evelyn: *So presumably he doesn't dance at too many weddings?*
Katherine: *Well, he's a new minister. So not at the moment, not at the moment.*

Question 3.

Evelyn: *Tell me about your secondary school. How did you feel about your school?*
Katherine: *Em… okay… There was a bit again… Academically I did… well. I was never top and I was surprised when I was put in the top Maths class, but then kind of slid down to the third group or something like that.*
My set of exams… I went to Woodlea which was just a four year secondary at that time and I got moved up to Rookwood after Second Year.
Woodlea was a bit rougher because of the catchment areas, so I tended to keep my head down because they tended to do the flour and egg on your birthday and stuff… em… And then you were the most popular person on Friday at break time because we came straight out of Home Economics having baked something… (Laughs)

Evelyn: *So how did you feel when you moved school to Rookwood?*
Katherine: *My friends moved with me. There were four of us but there was a wee bit of rivalry – I remember that… em...*
But no, I was proud, I was relieved if you like. I remember getting the envelope. If it was a thick envelope you moved up and if it was a thin envelope you stayed where you were. So it was, "Is it thick or thin?" At that particular time the dog had run away for a week, but we got it back and I got this envelope and I can still picture where I was walking when I opened it.
So… no… I was quite happy to go up to Rookwood because I think maybe I was a wee bit intimidated by the roughness. Too sheltered, I lived too sheltered a life. Moving up to Rookwood… again, it was , it was just different. You know there's not so nice people all over the place but it was different and yeah, it was a positive experience.
It was good and I got four Highers… em... all at C. I was looking at that recently. I got 8 O levels altogether, mixed ranging from A to C. What were my As? Art, Arithmetic, can't remember the other one. The Cs were History and French and I think I got a B for English and I did Physics and Chemistry. My Highers are Maths, English, Physics, Chemistry and in that year I took a crash O level Art which I just loved because O level Art you were restricted to "Draw this, draw that", but I was put in with a Higher class so I'd more freedom although I was doing O level. Oh, I just loved it. It was great. So I got an A Band 1 for Art.

Evelyn: *So you must have had a real talent for Art*

Katherine: *Well, I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it.*
I didn't stay on to Sixth Year because I had what I needed for college so you know there was no point in advancing my Art.

Evelyn: *So like the primary, there's no big dramatic memories. Overall it's just a good experience.*
Katherine: *Yes, I mean I suppose rumbling in the background..em.. is maybe my self-confidence is not..has taken a few knocks and this is why coming back to Hollypark is quite good.*
But from the… there was a right so and so of a girl and she kind of gave me a bit of a rough time but that was at Woodfarm. No,not constantly, but she was just a wee nippy sweet and a wee… oh, plus being a wee bit overweight I sometimes thought myself being a wee bit frumpy. There was sometimes the odd comment which, you know. Children as you know can be so cruel and it kind of stays with you.

Question 4.

Evelyn: *So you said you went to college after that?*
Katherine: *Yes, went down to Galashiels, the textile college. It was superb, fantastic. So I left home at 17… my poor mum. She was fantastic. She started to give me. They never stopped what I was doing but they gave me more… they never stopped what I was doing because I was a sensible girl… em... but she gave me a bit more freedom because you're going to college in x months time.*

Evelyn: *How did you think of Galashiels because that's quite an unusual choice to make? How did you find out about it? Through Careers or?*
Katherine: *Oh Careers, Careers was rubbish at school, absolute rubbish. No, another girl in my register class was going there and oh, she was talking about it and "oh, I like the sound of that." Em and in fact three of us from my year, three girls all went down. I stayed with one of the girls and we shared a flat eventually with another girl who I still see.*

Evelyn: *So what was it you studied?*
Katherine: *Clothing and Footwear Institute Clothing Studies. It was a four year sandwich course… that was, oh I thoroughly enjoyed that and I majored in Design and Marketing. You either did Production Management in third year or Design and Marketing and I went down the Design and Marketing route.*
But a very interesting comment was made when I applied… em... that it was noted that I was strong in my sciences... em…did I not want to consider the textile course? I said, "No, no, no, I want to do my clothing." You know I was quite happy with that because I'd been dressmaking at home for years and made wee outfits for my dolls and all this… em… and so I stuck with that and, yes I got through and I passed it and… although I was looking out certificates

the other day and I had to resit my general management paper in my finals. I'd nicely forgotten about that (laughs).
But you know I got through and I graduated… em… and then went out to work.

Evelyn: *Within the textile industry?*
Katherine: *Yes. Well I started off, came back to Glasgow and I started off at Freddy Miller really just doing quality control.*

Evelyn: *What are they?*
Katherine: *The common thread through most of the companies I've worked for is they supply Marks and Spencers. So that was ladies trousers, loads of different lines, but it was mainly ladieswear, trousers or... I remember these leather jackets, the security was so high, the skins were so… oh you'd to be quite particular. Em…but...*
I decided to move on. So where did I go? I should have brought my CV with me. I went to Perth and worked for Lawtex, a designer and they supply Babygro, Mothercare and it was all children's wear but it was really there that em my sciences kind of came in. I couldn't sustain the designy side of it because you were up to like one o'clock in the morning for weeks and weeks and weeks producing screeds and screeds of designs and none of them could be chosen you know, so it was, "Alright, we'll sidestep here,"

Evelyn: *Was it frustrating then?*
Katherine: *Yes, yes, yes. A wee bit. You know, I thoroughly enjoyed drawing but I just didn't have the edge or the talent that was needed to produce, you know, winning designs. There's a big difference between being able to draw a nice picture and produce a saleable… and of course, you know, you have specifications to work to.*
Och it was interesting and you know Perth was lovely and it was a good experience.
I also worked for Kinloch Anderson in Edinburgh. That's the tartan people. And Edinburgh was good, I enjoyed the social life there.
And that was on, I was taken on the design side but also the technical side because they were doing computerised kilt patterns. And there was a data point and you put in, you know key points and that was then used in production… em… that was quite interesting because I learned how to set a tartan so that when it was all pleated up it would look the same as if was flat. And there was also these supplied, they supplied the Royal Family with kilts etc. And so, I don't know if I was pleased or not. I remember trying on a kilt for Fergie – it was very loose of course!

Evelyn: *Was that when she was still in her large phase?*
Katherine: *Mmmm. (Laughter.) Yes, yes.*

Evelyn: *These sound really very unusual jobs, jobs you don't hear about at all. It must have been really interesting.*

Katherine: *Well, technically it wasn't textile designing at all because that would imply I was designing fabric…clothing production. I ended up, the groove I finally fitted into was garment technology which was right for me and I worked for Bairdwear who had several factories based around Glasgow – Springburn, Polmadie.*
But the sad thing is all these places now are gone and I ended up at Daks Simpson down in Larkhall for a 7.30 start in the morning and I was with them for a few years and then I became pregnant with Ross so... but that was super because I wasn't actually designing, I was taking the clothes from design through… we supplied Marks and Spencers… all the stages, because they've got red seals, black seals, sample size and then the grading and then the production. You change it because maybe a trim's too expensive and you get it to budget and then you go into production.
And then there were black seals which came from the first run of production and that was your quality that you had to match. So I was up and down to Marks and Spencers head office. I really liked it.

Evelyn: *A really responsible job.*
Katherine: *Probably (laughs). Yes…I didn't really think of it as that. I just enjoyed it and I was involved with writing quality specifications and liaised with other departments like the fabric department, the textile department because there'd be all sorts of trials on how durable the fabric was. Did it come up to M and S standards? Did it pill? Did it fade?*
So I thoroughly enjoyed that. But the sad thing about that time, 15 or 16 years ago, the clothing industry was the rag trade and they weren't open to job sharing or… and things like, you know, I had to produce samples and if you had to stay in the factory to 9 o'clock to produce that sample then you stayed in the factory till 9 o'clock, so it doesn't really fit in with bringing up a young family.

Evelyn: *So you had to go home really? You made the choice?*
Katherine: *Yes, after my maternity leave I just resigned. But I really enjoyed that. Never two days the same.*

Evelyn: *So you'd obviously built up a great deal of expertise and experience and skills to do these various jobs.*
Katherine*: I suppose so. Yes... yes. You know, you never kind of sit and analyse yourself, do you? It maybe takes somebody else to see….*

Question 5.

Evelyn: *So you had your first son and then your other son. Did anything special happening in your life make you decide to go the FLC?*
Katherine: *Well you talk to other mums and there was one mum… och... years before who'd come down but hadn't been disciplined enough so I knew about its existence. But… och… I think I was coming round to this direction... the boys were… you know that was two years ago and the boys were getting*

towards being more independent and I was going a bit stir crazy at home, but very personally I had breast cancer and you just… I got through that and I was the luckiest person on earth because every result I got was a good result. You know of two results I always got the better.

So it was all taken away, you know, we got it early and we got it removed. It was super. It just makes you think you know, go out and get life. Make the most of it.

So that was in February 05 that would be and I keep… and then I started. Well, I started over in the Business School cos I thought, what this girl had said, maybe I won't have the discipline to keep at it.

And I registered in the Business School to do ECDL . Now I'd done a previous night course about ten years ago, just a module on beginners Computing because I wanted to keep up. My son was doing it at nursery school and I thought, " Hold on, I don't want to be left behind here." So that got me interested. I can't remember why I chose ECDL, I think just looking through the prospectus and another girl had done it or was thinking of doing it and it sounded good.

But what turned out to be the best over at the Business School I chose a morning place because my children were at school but because of numbers they amalgamated it with the afternoon class, siting it in the afternoon… em... which was no use to me because I wasn't home in time for the kids… em…

So then it was suggested, why don't you do it in flexible learning and… I .I didn't look back. It's fantastic. It just soooo…fitted in with everything, all my home life.

And as for the discipline side of it I think once you're down there, you're drawn in. Jim and Yusef are so supportive and enthusiastic and helpful… em… you can't really kind of fail. They won't let you.

Evelyn: *That's interesting. I suppose it really was the inflexibility of the mainstream course.*

Katherine: *Ih hm. If it had moved to the morning I might just have stayed with that. But, I think all things happen for a reason and by coming… I mean Jim and Yusef work so hard, everyone works so hard to make it a community down there. And it sometimes seems a bit clichéd but it's not and I think that factor brings you back and although the people in the Business School were nice it wasn't the same. There wasn't the same pull..*

Question 6

Evelyn: *Please tell me about what happened on your first visit and how you felt.*

Katherine: *Oh, I don't know. (long pause)*

Evelyn: *Who was it you met when you first went in?*

Katherine: *Possibly Janice and then I sat down with Jim. But they just made it so easy. You know, they were really really nice and there wasn't anywhere to get lost or you know… em… just the whole set up of it. It's quote" user friendly", not intimidating at all. Because you know, a woman of mid forties , you know you can still be, you know new experiences in life can be a bit daunting at times. I think when you're returning you're a bit older, you're conscious that the place is full of younger people and you know you're trying to keep your end up for the older age group... not… you know and do it right.*

Evelyn: *Sounds like the younger people have just arrived outside. (Laughter)*
Katherine: *I suppose the other thing about the Flexible Learning, the actual physical place, it's open and you can see it at a glance and you're not kind of, "Oh do I go down there?*

Evelyn: *I think it's true, actual buildings can make people feel more anxious*
Katherine: *It's silly.*

Question 7.

Evelyn: *Can you tell me about how long you have been coming to the FLC?*
Katherine: *Well I started in the… em... oh that was the other thing because my ILA grant at the start, I don't think t here's enough information about your ILA grant because I was initially waiting to have a place confirmed at the college before I applied it for it, which was my mistake.*
With hindsight I should have applied for it first but there was no advice to say do that. Because you know maybe I was thinking back to when I was at college in the olden days. So that delayed my start cos also if you pay the fees yourself they're not reimbursed by the ILA so you know it wasn't… September till November, December possibly. Say November. Just a couple of months across the way, not very long at all.
And then I switched over late November, I can't remember exactly to Flexible Learning and I can't praise it highly enough.

Evelyn: *So you switched over in November and you were coming until June, something like that?*
Katherine: *I finished my ECDL by the summer holidays. I kind of gave myself a time limit. So there was a bit of a push on. And then I stopped the middle/end of June because the children were on holiday.*

Evelyn: *I think you've already said what you've been doing at the FLC, ECDL?*
Katherine: *Well, I did that the first year, then very nicely the ILA wrote to me and said, "Do you want more money?" Yes please! And I came down and discussed with Jim what might be the best option. Because I knew that I wanted to be here. Just kind of confidence building. Getting me back on the out to work track but I didn't know what job I was going to do and therefore I didn't know what qualifications I needed and I thought, just do something I*

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enjoy and that was why I did Microsoft Publisher. I wish there was a more intermediate one because I was just getting into the arty bit. Doing that straight after ECDL it was a wee bit repetitive because I'd come straight from that so I was only coming to the meat on the bone towards the end of that. But I can appreciate someone coming in cold would have to, you know go through the programme.

And that's when Yusef and I had that conversation and decided that work experience would be good and he set up the Millers work experience.

Evelyn: *The art shop?*

Katherine: *Yes. Oh it was brilliant. Loved it, loved it. You can see a kind of arty thread through my life.*

So I went in there, met with David Miller, fantastic gentleman, and I was to start in the October. He said, "How long do you want to work? To be there?" He was kind of, what do I want? What do I want? Which was funny, because I was almost expecting him to say, "Right, this is what you do." So he got me a wee bit wrong-footed and I said, "Well, a fortnight's not much use to you and it's not much use to me so maybe a bit longer,"

And then I said the first thing that came into my head and I said, "How about till Christmas?" and then I got home and thought, "Oh, that's three months."

But it's great because I did it three days a week within school hours so we had fifteen hours a week and the people were so nice and so helpful and it was good. It was good.

Evelyn: *So Publisher, is it only at one level?*

Katherine: *There's beginners or professional. I haven't had a conversation with Jim or Yusef about it but I was almost taking it like the Advanced ECDL. Maybe it would be more beneficial if you were in a job, you know, to use the professional one.*

And after that, because of Millers, I came back and did the crash course in typing. Which is not me and it was very, very hard work.

Evelyn: *So now you use all the right fingers?*

Katherine: *Shhhh! Don't tell Yusef. I'm saying nothing.*

Question 8.

Evelyn: *Tell me about what sort of impact coming to the centre has made to your life.*

Katherine: *Em… I think a very positive one. Em… it's given me if you like the easier option, the soft option. It's been if you like a middle ground from being totally at home to straight back out to work. It's given me that wee comfort zone in the middle to get psyched up again, to get the confidence, get the skills, meet people who, you know, you weren't talking about children with… You know, yes, generally very positive.*

Evelyn: *It's really interesting. It's this other aspect, this other aspect I'm trying to uncover, only it isn't really uncover…*

Katherine: *It is in a way. It's what's behind it. Yes, you can quantify the courses passed but why's that person gone for that course, and what's their motivation?*

The other thing kind of out of college that happened at the time and I referred to earlier on was, I went to Scottish Slimmers and I lost a bit over a stone and a half.

Evelyn: *Was that before or after you came to the FLC?*

Katherine: *Before. Before. In fact the week I reached my target was the week I was diagnosed with my cancer. And I was quite… people think I've lost weight because I was ill but I lost weight because I worked hard and I've maintained. I'm now about a size 10. I've maintained that over the last two years, so that's helped my self esteem.*

So my midlife crisis, whether I'm turning it round to be a positive thing, I don't know. Not quite re-birthing but you know the next stage in your life and college has been a very important part of that.

Because, yes the kids still need you but they need you in a different way, to give them money and make their beds! Well, not totally.

Question 9.

Evelyn: *Tell me how you felt about receiving an award as a learner.*

Katherine: *Very embarrassed and quite chuffed I think… em… I kind of… partly why me? Because, you know, there's other people with bigger stories and you know… em… I was quite chuffed with the recognition, as I think anyone would be. No one says no to a pat on the back.*

Scotland Direct, the direct learning awards, that comes up in September.

Evelyn: *I didn't know that*

Katherine: *Yes they've been at it again. So you're not… it's kind of four… I kind of thought you might be included in that. My name's been, I've been nominated for an award.*

Evelyn: *No, I didn't actually know about that, which is bad. I should have known.*

Katherine: *Four people nominated me from Hollypark. The girl, the company who's organising this phoned me up... something something experience… Learndirect… lunch. I thought it was a wind up. I was waiting, you know, for a radio presenter to change their voice. I hadn't received anything through the post at that point because of the postal strikes and that was why she was chasing it up.*

So once I came off and stuff came through the next day and I read through it and it was ok and then I spoke to Jim and he said, (you know I was teasing him

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and saying, "Is that you at it again? But thanks very much" and he said it was four that decided... em… so I don't know if I'm short-listed or not or I don't even know if I can go to the lunch.

I've got the dilemma that the job I now have... em... it's a pupil support assistant and it's 1 o'clock to three o'clock every afternoon. Of course the lunch is 11 to 2 and I'm only just in the door and when you're just in the door you don't want to take a day off. One of them hasn't started yet and they've got needs and so I really don't know. I'll choose my time and have a wee discussion with the teacher in the nursery.

I see it as something special. Learndirect has done a lot for me through Hollypark and if everyone said, "Oh I can't come because I'm working" then, you know… em… it's not very nice… em… but on the other hand, depending on staffing levels and the needs of this second wee girl… we don't… she's an unknown quantity at the moment… we know her case history but we don't know her. And speaking quite honestly, I don't want to jeopardise the prospects of a permanent position at the moment. So… wee bit of a dilemma.

Question 10.

Evelyn: *I think you've already answered this one, but I'll just ask you anyway. Tell me about how you get on with the tutors in the centre.*

Katherine: *Och they were alright. (laughter) . Em… as you say… very supportive, very enthusiastic, very proactive… em… friendly, approachable. Yes, that's another important thing when you are coming back… em… your tutor needs to be professional but approachable... em... and both Yusef and Jim are.*

And another part of the package is I went to see the Careers Advisor for a chat and she was very good and gave me quite a few ideas on phoning around and pass my CV round, so although I got this job myself, she was another part of the jigsaw. It's a not quite go between, you know, pointing you in the right direction.

Question 11.

Evelyn: *Tell me how you get on with Jenny and Janice. Has Janice been off quite a lot of the time you were coming?*

Katherine: *Well no, she was there the first year and Jenny wasn't. Em... very good, very nice, very helpful people. The fact that you can phone in and make or cancel a booking also adds to the ease of use, because you can't always make… I think if you did it regularly I don't think that's a good idea, but em... you know, it's an easy to use system... em... or if you find, "Oh I've got a spare hour", I phone up and you've got a computer free and… always very very pleasant and always very very helpful.*

Question 12.

Evelyn: *Tell me about any other learners you know or speak to in the centre.*
Katherine: *Em… yes… well I know Pat Farrell because she has a son in the same year as my eldest, so I knew Pat from before. Jan Wilson, who's doing ECDL just now, again she's another Clarkston girl and... well... I speak to Charles through Pat, older chap, lovely gentleman. And of course helping out in the personal development I got to know – who's the chap who's now got a job within the college?*

Evelyn: *Frank?*
Katherine: *Yes... and I'm just about to send you a new student. A new student's on the way, my friend Claire's coming down to do ECDL.*

Evelyn: *So there's quite a wee network.*
Katherine: *Yes. (laughs) Hoped you didn't notice. And I mean there's lots of other familiar faces that you speak to and that's why these lunches are good. Just wish there was maybe something happened another time, I was going to say more often, but maybe not on as big a scale. Because we all come in at different times and because you do a two hour stint you don't tend to go for coffee so you don't really have the opportunity to chat.*
Even something's that not… you know, just tea and coffee, or you know a couple of times a year as well as the lunch. But... em... you know it doesn't have to be expensive. It's maybe the getting together. You find other people's stories… eh… it's fascinating. What pulls everyone is a different story to the Flexible Learning. I suppose that's what you're doing.
Evelyn: *Yeah, there's quite… this is what is called narrative inquiry and it's really hearing people's stories and hearing the trends that are coming out.*

Question 13.

Evelyn: *So what are your future plans, Katherine, when you finish what you are doing at the FLC?*
Katherine: *A temporary job just now. It's ideal. I love it.*

Evelyn: *Is it actually a classroom assistant for people with special learning needs or is it a general classroom assistant?*
Katherine: *No the terminology, because I'm just learning it myself, the terminology is… classroom assistant is a general assistant and you can go and help several classes whenever they need you. A general assistant is also peculiar to a school. A pupil support assistant is assigned to a child or children and although to varying degrees of assistance report and you can be moved round schools and more general under the authority.*

Evelyn: *So is that something you can have training in and advance?*
Katherine: *No.*

Evelyn: *Is it something if it was permanent… I know we have a course here for special learning assistants, I wonder if it's the same thing.*
Katherine: *Yes there is a course. Because I applied years ago but I would have had to fund the course myself with no guarantee of a job at the end and you know it was a relatively significant amount of money… em... so that's why I've applied to the supply list… em... but yes you can get training but a lot of it's in house on the job.*

Evelyn: *So that's something you would like to stay with if you get the opportunity then?*
Katherine: *Yes, for the foreseeable future, for the next few years. My main motivation is the hours. You know I keep coming back to the boys. They are growing up, they are becoming more independent but they're not there yet. So that will… it's a very good stepping stone and I just love it.*
I did see a job advertised as for a technician on the fashion course at Gcal and I could tell by the salary quoted it was a full time job and when I phoned up to see if I could job share, yes another girl had inquired about that... em and it was very good and I got to speak to the girl whose job it was and she had been promoted. I'm sure the professor in charge would have been good but it was a more realistic chat and she was a mum herself and she was talking about through the holidays and uni holidays do not coincide with school term time. The whole point of me going back to work is if you like for my sanity and if it disrupts rather than for any other reason, for Stuart works his cotton socks off... em and we've always worked that way that his salary will cover... em and therefore if my job disrupts family life too much it defeats the purpose. So until the boys are older then… but I've kept the clipping, for future reference.
But no, going back to schools, I'm very comfortable in schools. Not working when the boys grew up I was able to be a parent volunteer. I take Beavers, I've been involved in scouting for years and years. I've been a parent volunteer and helped to run the summer playscheme and bookfairs… so it's a comfortable environment for me. I just go for the easy options!

Evelyn: *Thank you. It's so interesting to hear people's stories because you look at people and you never know what's going on behind the façade.*
(Katherine went on to talk after the interview about having a son with Williams' Syndrome and how she had gradually discovered this and how this had affected her decision to stay at home.)

TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH LEARNER NOT SEEKING WORK

Interview Transcript: Mary

August 28 2007: 11.35-12.00

Question 1.

Evelyn: *What can you remember about your first day at primary school?*
Mary: *I can't remember that much really, no. I remember my mother taking me and leaving me – that was about it. My first teacher, Miss Jeffcock*

Evelyn: *Quite an unusual name*
Mary*: Wasn't it!*

Evelyn: *Can you remember anything of how you felt or is it all a bit distant?*
Mary: *Aye, it's a bit distant. You're going away back, Evelyn, a lot of years. (laughs)*

Question 2.

Evelyn: *What are your strongest memories of primary school?*
Mary: *I liked my primary school, aye, I liked my primary school, very much. Aye.*

Evelyn: *Anything that stands out in your memory? Anything in particular?*
Mary: *Just I think like friendships that you make at school, you know, from early on… eh… some girls I still see from primary school. Aye, uh huh, Secondary school I didnae like very much at all but I loved my years at my primary school.*

Evelyn: *That's the pattern I seem to be hearing from several people. They love the primary and then something seems to go wrong at secondary.*
Mary: *Aye, I think your primary school seems to be kind of more intimate, you know there isnae as many people and then you go to the big school as they call it and there's thousands and thousands of people. Your own wee primary school was like a wee secluded …It's a huge jump, yeah.*

Question 3.

Evelyn: *Tell me about your secondary school. How did you feel about your school?*
Mary: *Oh I didnae like it at all.*

Evelyn: *Why was that?*
Mary: *I don't know. I don't know. From day one I didnae like it at all. I think you hear that many rumours at primary school before you go and things they do to new starts, not that anything like that ever happened to me but… I don't know and soon as you walk in it's just a sea of faces. And… eh… I don't know, it just seems to be a huge jump from primary school and…*

Evelyn: *What about later on, once you got used to the place?*
Mary: *I just… no… I couldnae get tae grips with secondary school at all.*

Question 4.

Evelyn: *Tell me about any courses you went to in colleges or universities after leaving school.*
Mary: *No, none. I just went straight from school into work.*

Evelyn: *So did you leave school as soon as you could then?*
Mary: *No, I stayed on until I was eligible to leave, until I was sixteen. I was 19 years a postwoman with Royal Mail, uh huh, and I had to leave through a bad back. I think it was years of carrying the bag, Evelyn, just sort of things went from bad to worse and I had actually tae end up leaving after the nineteen years.*
And, och well, I was at a bit of a loose end and I didnae know what to do with myself and I just bought a computer and I felt it was sitting there and I wisnae really doing much with it, you know, and I thought, "I'd love to learn, because I like my computer at home, I'd love to learn a wee bit more about this".
And went in and as you do for a wee search engine about what's what. And thought, "Hollypark College, that looks quite good" and I phoned up and I spoke to Jenny and she was really very helpful and she asked me to come in and have a wee chat. And I spoke to Jim and we decided there's quite a few courses you can do, Mary, sort of get a wee bit more knowledge about computers.

Evelyn: *So is it your local college, Hollypark?*
Mary: *Well, I'm only 15 minutes in the car really, you know.*

Evelyn: *19 years, that's a long time*
Mary: *Aye, aye, a very long time tae be carrying a bag, you know. But it was before they cut back tae one delivery. It was two deliveries a day you know and up at 4 o'clock in the morning, starting at 5 so it was hard work, hard lifting. I think people don't appreciate really the amount of weight you're carrying. It took its toll on me and I thought "Before I end up with serious problems I'm gonnae get out of this".*

Question 5.

Evelyn: *Please tell me about what happened on your first visit and how you felt.*
Mary: *Well, it's like everything else it's kind of like your first day at school, you're a bit nervous and kind of everything's strange to you but I found that everyone in the college, like tutors and the front desk, put you very much at your ease and they're so helpful towards you, you know here, and that's really what I loved about the college nothing seems to be a bother to anybody, you know, and they're so willing to help you to learn and that was really…*
I would sort of advise anyone and encourage anyone if they want to learn to come to Hollypark because the place is so well run and I'm no just saying that because you're interviewing me, really I think the place is so well run and everybody's that nice.

Evelyn: *What about the actual centre itself? Was it what you expected?*
Mary: *Well, I had actually seen some picture on the Internet, aye, so I kind of knew what to expect, you know, and I thought it was quite good. First, the fact what I like as well… everybody… it's no like a class… em… because I had actually been tae East Kilbride tae a course, a typing course in East Kilbride, typing for beginners. Sorry I forgot tae mention that but that didnae last very long.*

Whereas you're going intae that class and everybody's doing the same thing and maybe some pupils are sort of faster at learning so people are sitting there wanting to get on but, you know, some people are sort of holding them back. Whereas, I felt coming to Hollypark everybody's sort of doing different things so you're getting through the course at your own pace, which is quite good, you know, you're kind of left to do it at your own pace and I felt that was good.

Question 6.

Evelyn: *Can you tell me about how long you have been coming to the FLC?*
Mary: *Em… must be about a year and a half now.*

Question 7.

Evelyn: *What you have been doing at the FLC?*
Mary: *Well, I started off with Computing for Beginners and then I did Microsoft Word and then I did Windows XP. And then I did the photography course with Yusef and I've just finished Typing for Beginners.*

Evelyn: *That's the keyboard skills? That's something I think our staff should be doing.*
Mary: *I actually got an O level in typing at school, Secretarial Studies it was called at that time. So I just wanted tae brush up a wee bit, see if I could still*

get through it, aye, well, it was that long since I did any typing. It's so easy tae learn as well, you know, it's a good course. It shows you all the fingering.

Evelyn: *How often do you come?*
Mary: *Just about once a week, aye, just about once a week.*

Evelyn: *Do you always come on the same day?*
Mary: *It depends, sometimes it's a Monday, sometimes it's a Tuesday. Mondays/Tuesdays, whichever suits me better.*

Question 8.

Evelyn: *Tell me about what sort of impact coming to the centre has made to your life.*
Mary: *Just apart from sort of giving me the extra knowledge for the computer at home, it's been beneficial I think. But apart from that, any work I kind of plan tae go to in the future, I don't really intend to do anything at the moment involving computers.*

Evelyn: *So it's really more for your own personal development*
Mary: *That's it, aye, interest.*

Question 9.

Evelyn: *Tell me how you felt about receiving an award as a learner.*
Mary: *Absolutely dumbfounded. When I got the letter in tae say I was getting it I was shocked and thrilled at the same time, aye, uh huh. Aye, it was a complete surprise.*

Question 10.

Evelyn: *Tell me about how you get on with the tutors in the centre.*
Mary: *Oh, smashing, absolutely, so helpful.*

Evelyn: *Do you ask them for help often?*
Mary: *Aye, yep. I mean even Jim, sometimes you don't even need to ask Jim. Sometimes if you're sitting there, he'll just come up and ask how you're getting on, Mary, you know and just blethers away and you sort of ask him on the spot, yep.*
Even the people you meet at college as well, you know, nice people that come

Question 11.

Evelyn: *Janice's been off quite a lot since you came so it may be more Jenny you've come into contact with.*
Mary: *Aye, it's always been Jenny. Jenny's great. Even, I hadnae been for about six weeks or eight weeks because things at home are a bit hairy at the moment, so even I kind of sends Jenny a wee email and she sends me one, you know, "How are you getting on? Hope to see you back " and it's nice that wee sort of personal touch.*

Evelyn: *So if you don't go she emails you?*
Mary: *Aye, even at home. She gave me her email address at home and "How are you doing? How are you getting on? "*

Question 12.

Evelyn: *Tell me about any other learners you know or speak to in the centre.*
Mary: *Aye, well, Jan, I can't remember her other name, Jan and… eh… Christine Grey, Charles, I don't know Charles' second name either, he's a kind of older man, Charles.*

Evelyn: *How did you get to speak to them, because everybody's in sort of doing their own thing?*
Mary: *Well actually I helped out at the Day, the conference and that's how I met up with them there, uh huh. So just usually if I'm in in the morning, Jan or Charles comes in they just come up, you know, "How are you doing, Mary? How's the course going?" Which is nice.*

Evelyn: *Some people never speak to anyone. I wonder if we should do more to help people interact.*
Mary: *Do you no think, Evelyn, that's just the way some people are made? People just like to come in and do their own thing and go away.*
Evelyn: *So if we tried to make more social opportunities it might fall flat on its face.*
Mary: *I think it's just the individual concerned.*

Question 13.

Evelyn: What are your future plans when you finish what you are doing at the FLC?
Mary: *Really I don't know at the minute, to tell you the truth. Because I have been going to several people about my back because I've spent an absolute fortune since I left my work to try and get some answers to what the problem is but no one can seem to help me. I've actually spent about £520 of my own money. I've been to everybody, Evelyn.*

Six weeks ago I went to an osteomyologist. Somebody, a girl I had been at school with gave me his card and said, "Oh go tae him, he's great." So I went to him but didnae help me either. So really I don't know at this point in time.

Evelyn: *So, are you in pain all the time?*
Mary: *Aye, practically. Wake up in the morning with it or if I don't wake up in the morning with it at some point in the day it seems to flare up so I really don't know. I wish I did because I miss working, actually you know, because I've worked since I left the school at 16, well I'm 47 this year. I've never not worked so it's difficult.*
All the doctors can do is send you to physiotherapy but a physiotherapist said to me, "Physiotherapy is no going to help you Mary". And when you go to the doctor's all they want to do is give you painkillers and I don't want to be on painkillers for the rest of my life, Evelyn, you know. It's a catch 22 at the minute. Till I get something sorted I'm in limbo at the minute.
It used to be I'd go into my work and by quarter past 5 I'd be hanging off the door with pain and it got to the stage I went to my manager and said, "Look, I cannae go on like this." And he says, "Well Mary, I've seen you struggling for a long time now, you know."
And it all kind of stemmed from there and I went to the doctor and she put me on the panel and he says, "You just need to do that Mary until they make a decision what they want to do because they just can't gie you your books kind of thing". So that was the road I had to go down to get paid off. It was terrible, oh terrible but I actually do blame that, I blame the years of carrying the bag. Because I mean you look at any posties carrying a bag, they're struggling under the weight. Because one of the chaps I used to work with he has now got 19 years under his belt as well and he just left two weeks ago there on the Friday – same problem, back problems, the same.

Evelyn: *Is there any kind of compensation you can get?*
Mary: *How can you prove it, Evelyn? How do you prove it? They could turn round and say, "Well, we've had guys working here for 30 years and they havnae got a bad back so what dae you say to that?*

Evelyn: *Have you got any kind of support at home?*
Mary: *My partner's good, uh huh. Aye, he's good but there's days when the pain is just so severe and you ask him to kind of rub it and one night last week he pressed a bit down at the bottom of my back and oh God the pain of it. Terrible and he says, "Go back tae the doctor, you know you need to do something, get back and see him." But the only two options you've got are send you tae a physiotherapist who disnae dae any good or gie you stronger painkillers which I really don't want to do. I don't want to go down that road.*

Evelyn: *I really do hope you find something.*
Mary: *So do I, Evelyn, so do I. Plus it's a psychological thing, you miss the company after all those years working.*

APPENDIX 8:

TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH TUTOR

Interview Transcript: Jim
March 20 2008: 1 hour 15 minutes

Question 1.

Evelyn: *Can you tell me a bit about how you come to be working at the Flexible Learning Centre?*
Jim: *Well, I came to the college via a graduate training for work scheme and was initially placed in the college library and I saw the position advertised, the learning centre assistant post and went for that and got it and the tutoring slowly fell into place from there.*
Initially I was offered the Tuesday evening slot while still in the learning centre assistant post and eventually when you yourself got the second lecturer post established within the centre I went for that and got it but I was fairly certain when I seen what was going on in the flexible learning centre that that was where I wanted to go. I realised that within weeks of arriving in the college itself.

Evelyn: *So before you came to the college you didn't really know anything about the FLC?*
Jim: *No.*

Evelyn: *Or had you ever come across one?*
Jim: *To be honest my views on education were largely shaped by my Dad who was a teacher in secondary education so… and I had actually flirted with the idea of teaching a long time ago but if anything my Dad put me off it, some of his chat as a department head.*
But no, I wasn't aware there were operations like the FLC if the truth be told and as I said when I seen how things were operating there I realised I really wanted a part of it, It looked like a good thing to get involved in.

Evelyn: *You originally did a planning qualification, wasn't it?*
Jim: *Yes it was essentially town planning with an emphasis in the latter year of sustainability, sustainable development. The actual title of my degree was Information and Management Sciences majoring in urban and regional development and I really focused in on the whole sustainable development thing which was very big at the time or is arguably even bigger now.*
But yes I studied that and with hindsight, well, it probably wasn't the right choice to make straight out of school. I done it and I seen it through.

Evelyn: *How was it, it's quite an unusual one, how were you attracted to that one?*

Jim: *It was one of several, one of a few… I suppose it was the combination of not really knowing what to do, not receiving particularly great career advice at school. There was almost a philosophy where if you stayed on to Sixth Year you went to university.*

The actual course you done at university was almost academic and planning was something I had an interest in but, but with hindsight it wasn't the right course to do but I think a lot of people who were leaving school at that time made that mistake. I mean things have all sort of came good in the end, in a roundabout way of getting here.

Two things I flirted with at school were teaching and journalism, both of which I would argue I've kind of, sort of ended up doing. Yeah because I tend to write a lot outwith the actual teaching side of the lecturing post being involved with things like The View and the website for the learning centre and there is the actual teaching or tutoring as we call it, which is I think a more appropriate term and eventually I ended up involved in the areas which I had an actual interest in

Evelyn: *That's interesting, so in a way it was kind of chance. That scheme could have sent you somewhere else perhaps. Did you have a choice where you went?*

Jim: *No. There was a massive, massive amount of good fortune involved in it. I don't know if you want as much detail as this but I was currently with a training for work organisation called Developing North Ayrshire and Don Morrisey the LITEhouse manager had been in touch with them before and I believe he'd taken someone from them before.*

He was absolutely desperate in the library and they'd been able to provide him with someone for a short period and basically Don was really struggling again with the workload in the library and had approached and tried several avenues and sort of as a last resort went back to that organisation and within the graduates they had at the time I was sort of the closest to what Don was looking for, having done the post graduate diploma in information technology, but I had actually been offered a sort of part-time post there and also had jobs within the organisation. I was informally offered a post there. In the background I had actually made moves to go and teach English in Japan.

Evelyn: *Oh right! I didn't know that.*

Jim: *But I had sort of come to a point of thinking maybe it was time to get completely away from Scotland. Whether I would have actually seen it through I don't know but I actually applied for it with the Nova Group and went into the interview and was accepted for it and within the space literally of a couple of days I was offered a part-time post, the Nova Group were pushing me to sort of make a commitment with them for a start date and this guy Don Morrisey from Hollypark College got in touch about the same time.*

I came in to see Don for an interview and a tour and I realised that it looked like a really good operation and then I thought I would quite enjoy it and after a couple of days – if I remember correctly I started the following week. - I

thought something might come of this and I decided to go down that road. And I can safely say it's the best decision I ever made.

But there was certainly a massive amount of good fortune in Don approaching Developing North Ayrshire. We're obviously well outside the catchment area here. The chap who sort of ran the graduate operation was a chap called Dan Heaney who came in to see Don and sort of sold him on me as the closest fit. So I have to, have to thank him a lot. I'm eternally grateful to him for that. He was very good.

And as I said, after only a matter of weeks I realised I really wanted to be part of things and in the June, sort of 3 to 4 months later I was selected for interview for the learner centre assistant post and the rest as they say is history.

Evelyn: *How long ago is that now?*
Jim: *2002. I came in February 2002 and the interview was on Wednesday 10th June 2002 because the World Cup was on and I watched the Ireland Germany match in the lunch hour and the interview was in the afternoon*

Question 2.

Evelyn: *You've answered quite a bit of the next question already. What is your own experience of education and how has that influenced you in how you think about education?*
Jim: *Well, I quite enjoyed school, I must admit. I found secondary school on the whole quite a good experience. I think we benefited from going to a fairly decent school, St Martin's Academy. It wasn't a school that had a particularly terrific reputation but it didn't have a bad reputation. It was actually housed in one of the rougher areas within Kilwinning but I certainly felt it was a decent school and I quite enjoyed the six years.*

University first time round I enjoyed but I sort of knew, probably by the end of the first year that I had possibly made the wrong choice and I seriously considered starting again but I decided to stick with it. I didn't want to lose the work I'd done over the first year but again I would say that on the whole it was a fairly enjoyable experience.

The post graduate course was and it wasn't. It was enjoyable because it was clearly a very high quality course that was going to yield the results and I established myself with a good group of people and 90% of the work, the non-exam work was group-based, so that was good.

But it was also a very, very difficult course to actually manage and you had to essentially treat it like a job. One of the lecturers told us in the first week we should approach it as if we were undertaking a working week, 35 hours Monday to Friday and that's really what you had to do to get by and not even to particularly excel in it. It was a practically vertical learning curve.

Evelyn: *Did people stick with it or did a lot of people drop out?*
Jim: *No, by and large everyone did stick with it. They actually ran two cohorts of the post graduate diploma and I think they still do so I actually done it back to*

front and we started in the February of 2000. We went through to the end of the June, the summer break, then we came back in the September and went through to the January. So we done it kind of back to front.

But it was traditional – one year, 2 semesters, 8 modules. And just a massive amount of work. But it was the catalyst for a career change and it eventually led to where I am now so again it was a very good decision at the time though it was a risk.

Evelyn: *Were both of these qualifications at Paisley?*
Jim: *Yes, both at Paisley. The first time in the department of Land Economics and the second time in the Computing and Information Systems department. I believe it's still called that.*

But, yeah, I wanted to stay at home basically and Paisley for many practical reasons, mainly the travel aspect, suited. Plus it had, having been a college of technology before, a good reputation. It was very much practical based and I knew there were a lot of people from industry who had then went in to lecturing who were spearheading the department the computing department. They had a lot of guys who were big league players out there in the field over the years so certainly in the two departments I was in there were very good staff but I enjoyed Paisley both times on the whole.

Evelyn: *So your own experience of education has been positive?*
Jim: *I would say on the whole it's been positive.*

Evelyn: *How do you think it's influenced you in how you think about education?*
What's your own kind of philosophy of education, if you like?
Jim: *I think to be honest I've been influenced more since coming here. I've certainly thought about it a lot more. Perhaps that's obvious but I've really had my eyes opened since coming to Hollypark and being properly involved in education. And I'm very much today about our college ethos learn for life. That's what we essentially try to deploy every day in the Flexible Learning Centre.*
I can see that the education is a lot more than school and university. It's a lot more than school, college and university. It can accomplish many things.

Question 3.

Evelyn: *We always refer to FLC teaching staff as tutors and other teaching staff in the college as lecturers. Can you tell me, Jim, what difference you see between the role of FLC tutor and subject lecturer in the college?*
Jim: *I think traditionally a lecturer is someone who is seen as a person who basically delivers structured lessons to classes following certain criteria working to a block schedule.*

Tutoring to me is a more appropriate term for what we do because it implies short bursts of one to one in a whole range of subjects with different people sort of outwith the traditional structure that the rest of the college has to follow. Although my job title is actually lecturer I always refer to myself as a tutor and we refer to ourselves as tutors in the Guide. I think it's really sort of the traditional view of a lecturer. We don't do. well we do but it's a small part of what we do. We're not involved in those traditional means of delivery. Tutoring just seems a more appropriate, a softer term I suppose as well and I think it's a term that sort of works better with our learners. Because many of them being adult returners would associate the word lecturer with a person standing dictating a lesson at the front of a class and obviously what we do is very different to that. I think they are interchangeable but tutor is sort of more, a sort of more relevant term in terms of how the centre operates although we certainly do many of the things that lecturers do. We are lecturers. We do just prefer to refer to ourselves as tutors.

Evelyn: *This year you've done both roles really. How have you found that?*
Jim: *The classes are very different. But I've enjoyed them. But it is a completely different animal – preparing the lesson, having the same group of people for 13 weeks and having to assess them to make sure they all meet certain criteria is a completely different challenge.*
We are not particularly assessment driven in the FLC. Most of our learners just want to come in and do short bursts of learning to then take away then and deploy at home or in the office. They're not particularly bothered many of them about certificates, seeing it's all about coming in and doing the learning and you know SQA material is a tiny fragment of what we offer. Everything is very practical, hands on and just about coming in and learning the skills so teaching the classes has been a new experience, a good experience but I think I've sort of built up the confidence to manage a class and what I do in the FLC because if we have 15 or 16 learners booked in and I'm on duty you have to basically manage the place confidently, you have to tutor confidently and you're there for all to see. And that's certainly prepared me for doing classes.
And I would say I've been very pleased with the classes so far. I think there's been little things after the event I have thought could have been better but I think that's possibly always going to be the case doing this for the first time, but yeah very different but enjoyable.

Evelyn: *Yes it's interesting for officially the title is lecturer but it's almost like an alternative title.*
Jim: *I must admit I find myself sometimes using lecturer. I think the two are completely interchangeable. At the end of the day as long as we know what we are then we know what we should be doing in the FLC and that is all that really matters.*
But part, a small part of why I use that word in certain circumstance is because in certain circumstances I feel that tutor can imply that we don't do things like preparation, marking etc which we actually do. We prepare in the centre. We

do mark work albeit it's a lot softer if you like than takes place elsewhere in the college but we still mark work. We give feedback to learners so we certainly do everything else that lecturers are doing. We develop materials.
So I feel that sometimes tutor can mistakenly be taken as a term where that sort of isn't involved and it very much is. I think we probably use it more for our learners. Tutor is a sort of friendlier…

Evelyn: *Do you think it means something different for them?*
Jim: *I think they would read the two terms differently. Yes, I think some of our adult returners would read lecturer simply as, well basically an older man, probably standing at the front of a classroom or a lecture hall delivering a lesson with an overhead projector in the background and tutor is someone who comes over and sits down with you in short bursts of one to one.*
I think some of our learners would interpret the two terms differently although we have lecturer on our staff badges and I do use it and at the end of the day they know what they're getting from us and it doesn't really matter but yeah I think if they were asked they would give a different analysis of the two terms.

Question 4.

Evelyn: *Tell me what gives you least satisfaction working in the FLC.*
Jim: *Oh God, what a question! I would say absolutely nothing to do with the centre itself. It tends to be issues we can't control, issues that are generated elsewhere in the college. Sometimes feeling you know, like there is a lack of support from areas higher than our unit. We are arguably grossly under-marketed.*
It would be gripes I suppose like outwith the centre itself, nothing to do with the operation of the centre that I would say sort of falls into that category. It would tend to be frustrations sort of generated elsewhere.

Question 5.

Evelyn: *Can you tell me, if you had to pick out one particular experience, I know this is really difficult what has been your most rewarding experience working in the FLC if you had to pick out one.*
Jim: *Oh God, it's very difficult to pick one thing. Well, I'll pick a very recent one. I'll pick one from last night actually, the session on Wednesday the 19th.*

I had a learner in called Vivian McCarley who actually started ECDL with us and had effectively to abandon it only a relatively short while in due to her mother taking ill. She subsequently died and she had a very, very hard time with her and she actually came back in and actually asked to see me to see if she could essentially pick up the ECDL Course. And that would have been sort of autumn of last year and I was able to make an arrangement with Andrew the ECDL manager and she was able to sort of come in and make a fresh start at it under the circumstances.

And from that point she has been an absolutely rock solid learner. She's in every Wednesday sort of mid afternoon/early evening making great progress. She's been tested setting a very decent pace and she completed her last module test last night. And she was absolutely delighted.
I sat with her and explained what would happen to the log book and she would get a certificate. And for the first time ever, I never did this before and that's why I'm using this example… I've got to know her quite well… I let her stamp the log book for the last time. I showed her where to position the stamp and I let her put it down and she done it with great gusto. It was the final seal for her on a bit of a difficult journey but she's done incredibly well to get back into it. She ended the session by saying, you know, I was to pass on great thanks to Yusef who's obviously been in contact with her a lot as well and how great we've been in getting her through it and how you know it's just been a real achievement for her.
And that's been a very recent example of what sort of makes the job so enjoyable is that we get very tangible benefits from it, actually seeing in that case someone's mood and a small part of their life just being changed by completing a qualification and gaining a real sense of achievement. And the fact, you know, that it was halted and she…

Evelyn: *What sort of age would she be?*
Jim: *Vivian would be in her, I would say, early to mid forties. I could find out exactly.*

Evelyn: *No, it's just to get a rough idea because I think the average age worked out last year as 47. It's quite interesting. So she'd be just about the typical age group?*
Jim: *Yes, mid to late forties but as I said a difficult journey. She stayed on board for this part of it and got through it and did incredibly well. A very, very, very good learner. And a very nice person with it and learners like that just tend to make the job very enjoyable. I think we benefit from having a lot of learners who have a lot of grace, who are willing to sort of put the work in and let us guide them and will be patient when we're sitting with another learner. That's a very good thing about the centre.*
Last night I had also a learner who you will know, Alexis, who was one of our awardees at the last Celebration of Learning. She just came back.

Evelyn: *I wondered what had happened to her.*
Jim: *What's happened is she went through an extremely messy divorce, unfortunately. You see Yusef and I tend to…*

Evelyn: *I remember her talking about it when I interviewed her over a year ago and she mentioned the husband and she's come back?*
Jim: *Well, Yusef and I tend to get the news whether we want it or not from a lot of our learners. We tend to sort of… they must feel that we are approachable enough… I take it it's a good thing that they can offload this sort*

of information on us so that Alexis's been filling us in on a pretty grim period including a very messy divorce.

But anyway she's come back and she's re-enrolled in ECDL and she came in last night to do her first module test and I can only describe her state as being sort of almost manic. She was so nervous about actually undertaking the test. She decided to start with Module 2 of ECDL, which is Word Processing because that's something she's actually done with us before so she had quite a bit of background knowledge on that and I must admit I think she is someone who could very easily panic and bomb in a test and really just let her nerves get the better of her but I decided to let her go for it.
She done the practice test ok- she got all the questions right and that's generally a sign that the learner is ready. I just hoped she could keep her nerves under control. She undertook the test and she got 97%. She got one question wrong and it's actually the highest score we've ever had for that module in a long, long time - possibly ever – I'd need to check the records – but it was an incredible thing to actually pull off and she was absolutely delighted and began shouting and cheering and bouncing around on her chair and I had to tell her that there were other learners in and to quieten down. She was embarrassed.
But that's just another incident from last night that basically makes it an enjoyable job.

Evelyn: *That's really interesting because I had been wondering what had happened to her.*
Jim: *She enrolled on ECDL about Christmas and she's been working away at home and that was her coming in to do her first module test. So it was successful and hopefully she's keep that up for the rest of them.*
But there are – I've got hundreds of stories like that. That's the thing, it happens a lot and quite often I say to Lara, my fiancée, that there are some evening sessions when I come home and I'm absolutely buzzing with it, that's the phrase because I'm really energised. In such a good session I've really felt like it's just been something – there's been some real quality learning taking place.
I think ECDL, now the last all three evenings of this week – I've spoken to Yusef about Tuesday evenings – all 3 evenings we've had 8 to 10 ECDL learners with us each evening and we're running ECDL I think as a model for how it should be done. You can always learn by us but it's really working.

Evelyn: *That's really interesting. Do you think maybe people who come in the evenings have extra commitment because it's harder to come out? Are they coming out after a day's work?*
Jim: *Most of them are. A small number of learners have actually changed their bookings to the evenings because of the car parking situation and that's just something that's worth mentioning. It is a problem short term, the car*

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parking , so there are a few learners who traditionally used to come during the day and they now come on one or two evenings.

But most of the people who come in the evenings, yes are coming straight from work or they are coming after a short break at home having been at work all day. So, yeah, it certainly takes something to come out after a full day's work and do a full day's ECDL or Sage. So I think it would be a fair analysis to say you are getting a fairly committed learners coming out in the evenings. I'm certainly finding the evening sessions hugely enjoyable.

And for me as well, sort of a side issue, the fact that the time goes in very quickly if you're kept busy ECDL testing and it's a quarter past eight before you know it and it's starting to wind down.

Evelyn: *That's really very interesting and it's a good argument too for having it in the evening when you hear that.*

Jim*: Definitely. Yeah, definitely. And a lot of our ECDL learners certainly are at work during the day so the evenings are the only times when they can come in outside the work they do at home.*

Evelyn: *What about Alexis, is she looking to go back to work or….*

Jim: *I believe she is now and she, the reason she told me she wanted to do the ECDL, she had seen it advertised on job adverts she'd been sort of toying with so I think just now she's just going to take a bit of time out and complete the qualification and yes, go back to some sort of office based work which was what she done before.*

Evelyn: *I'm really glad to hear that because she made such a strong impact on me before.*

Jim: *Uh huh. I wasn't sure when she enrolled on the ECDL if she was gonnae make a go of it because she still seemed to have a lot of things wrong going on in her life and you do tend to get everyone's stories and that's fine but I wasn't expecting what happened last night. I really thought that – I could just see that she was very nervous – just quite an excitable person and I thought, " Is she just gonnae keep her nerves under control here?" But she really pulled it out the bag and it was an incredible score to get for her first module test.*

Evelyn: *That's great. That's fantastic.*

Question 6.

Evelyn*: How do you decide which learners will receive awards at our Celebration of Learning?*

Jim: *Traditionally it's always been a group effort between myself, Yusef, Janice and Jenny and we generally just get together and talk about who has really impressed us over the course of the session.*

I suppose the lead is really taken by Yusef and I because we are on the floor dealing with the learners all of the time and we are the ones who've actually seen their work so we tend to make the bulk of the suggestions. Janice and

Jenny might throw a few names in and Yusef and I might agree with that or we might decide that there's someone we feel is better, so it's a team effort at the end of the day sort of led by Yusef and I.

We basically just pick learners who we feel have stood out during the course of the session. The only thing that I'm just a little bit… not sort of worried about, but something that's always preyed in my mind is that when we do give out the awards at the celebration of learning, we have other learners there who are not receiving awards. Something that I intend to work into my speech if I've to deliver it at this year's celebration of learning, which I sort of touched on last year, but I want to make it a bit bigger this year, is that those other learners, although they didn't receive awards are as important to the actual centre. I'm planning on using Jock Stein's famous phrase, that football without fans is nothing, so a learning centre without learners is nothing and that everyone is part of it and everyone makes it a learning community and although we select 10 or 12 individuals who we feel deserve special recognition, everyone has played a part in making it a good session.

Evelyn: *Is there anything that all people that impress you the most have in common? What are the sort of factors?*

Jim: *The learners that I've tended to have picked have been learners where I've seen that there has been something else, something big going on that they have sort of being dealing with and it's taken just a little bit extra to stick with the course and to keep attending and to keep up the standard of the work and I think that's a great thing for someone to be able to do that.*

And I think the standard of the work as well, you know we have some learners who go through the ECDL for example, and they're content with just doing the core material and sort of doing the bare bones and that's fine, but we have other learners who will ask me questions every single time they're in, who will do five times more than they have to do on a task and who produce 90-97% pass marks across the seven modules and I think those learners deserve praise for that, you know for really taking it just a little bit further.

But those two things are probably the main things, it tends to be a theme of the celebration of learning quite often that the learners we have picked, there is a story there and it's taken something special either to bring them to the centre or to keep them in the centre, but I think we try to balance that with the fact that a lot of our business based learners just produce very high standards of work and just put a massive amount of effort into the courses and I think that's something else that should be applauded.

Evelyn: *How long have we had that? Since you've come?*

Jim: *I believe the first one was the December of my first year, which would have been December 2002, so this will be number 6.*

Evelyn: *You've been doing it for 6 years now, it's quite a long time.*

Question 7.

Evelyn: *Ok. Tell me about what you think are the main reasons which bring learners to the centre*

Jim: *Firstly, the fact that they can come when it suits them, that they're not tied in to coming on a certain day and a certain time.*

And secondly, obviously is the actual courses that we offer. We do have a portfolio, we've got a good mix of computing courses. We've got them at all levels. We have catered to things that are very much in demand like SAGE and ECDL and that there is really something for everyone regardless of where they're at with desktop computing. I think we've got a very decent range of courses on offer.

The actual method of working I think is something that appeals to a lot of people. The fact that they can come in and almost be anonymous, they can get on with their course sitting next to someone who's doing a completely different course.

And basically the actual method of working, the actual supported self study, I think that's a draw in itself that people know that they can work at their own pace and that they're not under any pressure to keep up with anyone else. They know they have a notional time limit on the course. You know, we're sort of keeping an eye on them, but we do sort of let them very much do it their way within reason so I think that's something else that appeals.

I think the fact that we do have a bit of a separate identity as well, the fact that we're in a separate building, is a draw for a lot of learners and they're not coming into the sort of the hubbub, the sort of main college if you like. I think that's certainly something. I think there are many reasons why people arrive at us in the first place. That's certainly the main ones.

Question 8.

Evelyn: *Can you tell me how you see flexible learning centres fitting into college structures as a whole? You were saying there that it's like a separate building. How does it fit in with the whole college picture do you think?*

Jim: *Well, I would like to think that we are preparing learners for further study at this college, that it's feasible that a learner can start in the flexible learning centre, build up their skills, build up their confidence then take on a part time course or a full time course, like actually take on an HN or an HNC or an HND so that's certainly part of it.*

I think on this note, we could be doing a lot more in terms of providing a cross college role, really sort of being the hub of ICT activities for college staff and students. We're making strides in that direction, a recent example would be the training of the secretariat that we've committed to, so I see us as having a big role in staff development and CPD I suppose as well.

College students obviously are always welcome to use the centre; you know it's probably the quietest area of the college, anyone can come in and get on with course work but it's just a fact that a lot of our learners are only coming to the

flexible learning centre and probably only will come to the flexible learning centre because we fit their needs. They want some short bursts of learning to take away and as I said deploy at home or in the office and aren't particularly bothered about taking on full time or part time courses.

And we certainly do have a big role within the college, but we could be doing more I've always felt as a cross college service. To really do that we'd be back to the old issue of staffing you know, that we really would need to be staffed better to really say yes to more demands that we've been asked within the college and to do more for college students as well.

I think things that we've been involved in recently have been very good in that score, the secretariat project I'm sure will be a great success, the last one certainly was. The ICT-lite course was a collaborative effort between myself, Don and Harry selling learning innovation. I think that's something that's benefited a lot of classes, a lot of college students.

But I think part of our sort of role within the college is recognising that we do have a significant chunk of learners who really are just wanting to come to the flexible learning centre and get on with their burst of learning and leave, and take it back and deploy it wherever that might be.

Evelyn: *Yes, I like that phrase a burst of learning.*
Jim: *I've been using that a lot recently, I'm not sure why. I must have read it somewhere.*

Evelyn: *Yes, it's an interesting one. How do you feel flexible learning centres relate to other people in the college who are teaching IT?*
Jim: *I think we offer something different and I think that is recognised within ITBM. We offer short courses. We don't really compete with them for learners I would say. You could argue that ECDL really should be left to us or Microsoft Office Specialist should be left to them. There are a couple of courses where we are essentially competing and it might be better just to let one of the operations do it but generally speaking we do two completely different things. ITBM offer, you know HN, HNC, HND etc., full time and part time courses. We offer short courses notionally, 30 hour courses, 80 hour in the case of ECDL and we offer them through two completely different styles of learning as well, so if anything I would see us as a complement to ITBM, that we are offering a completely separate product, a distinct product.*

Evelyn: *Yeah, I think this year was the first time that the inspectors had looked at it at all really, to any extent.*
Jim: *Well, I personally welcomed that, I thought that's a good thing because I would rather that they actually know what we do and that it's recognised that we provide a good service and that there's serious learning taking place in the flexible learning centre.*

And we're lumped in with the library as some sort of resource and there's absolutely serious learning takes place every day in the flexible learning centre

and for me the fact that they did pay quite a bit of attention was finally a bit or recognition of that.
Evelyn: *Yeah, absolutely.*

Question 9

Evelyn: *Do you think government policies have affected the development of the FLC?*
Jim: *Yes, absolutely and the absolute obvious thing that I really have to mention would be the ILA scheme, because that has brought us a massive amount of new learners. It's a good scheme, it's been well run, it's been well managed. We have a lot of control over it, the administration of it and there's no doubt that it's brought us a huge amount of learners. It's one of the reasons why ECDL is so successful. I would need to go through the stats, but I would be very surprised if certainly over, I would say between half and three quarters of our ECDL learners are ILA funded.*

Evelyn: *Is that right?*
Jim: *Yeah, must be, must be. So certainly initiatives like that have basically brought us lots of new learners. I think also the fact that the government are spending advertising on LearnDirect Scotland for example and really sort of pushing people to get in touch and they are sort of now pushing things like distance learning and flexible learning and I heard an advert the other night actually, for LearnDirect Scotland so that's certainly something again.*

Evelyn: *Was this on the radio?*
Jim: *This was on STV.*

Evelyn: *Really? I must try and see that, yeah.*
Jim: *It was a television advert and it's five people and they're all on mobile phones from various places. One of them is at home, one of them is on her lunch break, one of them is at work doing something, he's on his break, one of them is at a football break and they're all basically phoning the LearnDirect Scotland helpline to be told that they can fit the learning around what they're currently doing and she certainly mentioned flexible learning, so things like that, absolutely.*
Getting away from the centre I suppose, although it is related, is things like the Big Plus and all the government work that's been done on adult literacy and numeracy you know, and we've now got a much closer working relationship with the Life Skills learning unit where they are actually taking learners who are not really suitable, who are not really ready for flexible learning, they're doing some great work with them and they're building up their skills and their confidence, preparing them to become flexible learners and that's sort of a by-product of the whole Big Plus campaign and the fact that people are encouraged not to be scared, to go and improve their basic IT and their Maths and their English etc.

Evelyn: *Yeah, that's interesting. The Big Plus seems to kind of re-emerge periodically, but I noticed that there was quite a lot of people in the Lifeskills place the other day, it looked quite busy.*

Jim: *I think Linda and Annette are just, I think they're doing an absolutely fantastic job. I think Linda, I've always had a tremendous amount of respect for, she's just a very hard worker.*

And Annette has hugely impressed me, she's very, very good with the learners and she has some learners who are very challenging and she's just got a way of working with them and getting them to sort of progress and they do some terrific work.

I actually had a learner who came in to see us there for an enrolment who really wasn't ready to engage in flexible learning and Yusef spoke to Annette who came over and spoke to her, and she was absolutely delighted that we could offer the sort of pre-step of a bit of one to one with her and hopefully she'll gravitate over to us in the future.

I think getting back to the question, I think the government generally, there does seem to be a push of the learn for life agenda of employability and citizenship and the paper that I read through, I actually based a bit of my speech on. I lifted a small bit of it we were encouraged to read last year, the circular given out to all the colleges on employability was very good and I think that's getting across to people.

And then you have the fact that certain courses are helping people to get ahead in the jobs market, courses like ECDL with an ever increasing profile, the fact that a learner can get essentially government funding to do most of that course is a very good thing.

Evelyn: *Yeah, The only kind of worry I have is if they suddenly decide that they're not going to continue with it.*

Jim: *I was actually talking… Jenny and I were discussing that the other day and it would be bad for us because we're really making lots of money through ILA. I don't foresee it happening because it's been well run and you can't really compare it to the scheme that went before. But I think it has encouraged a lot of people to come out and do learning who otherwise would have stayed at home because they wouldn't have paid for the course and it's just it's been a motivating factor to get people to come out to learning centres.*

Question 10.

Evelyn: *Tell me about the challenges you face with learners*

Jim: *I would say that the greatest challenge comes from our absolute beginners. I find them more challenging than a very competent learner. If we have someone in for example, doing Microsoft Access Advanced (very high level database work), that learner, it's all about the actual application and as long as you know your stuff, you can sit and solve a problem and it's not easy, you know solving the problem might take a bit of dexterity but you don't have the sort of overlapping issue of lack of confidence and a lack of sort of*

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their own ability and really being essentially scared of what they're undertaking. A lot of absolute beginners bring that with them, so while you're trying to teach them about word processing and spreadsheets etc., you're also trying to keep them involved in the learning process, to build up their confidence and build up their belief in themselves basically.

Evelyn: *Do you think that (maybe this is difficult to answer) it's a lack of confidence in general or is it particularly related to some kind of technophobia about computers?*
Jim: *Personally I think it's more about computers, because I see people all the time who could wipe the floor with people in so many fields. I look at people like my dad who was a teacher for almost 40 years, he was a department head for 25 of them - I come across people all the time.*
I was talking to Louise's ward sister, her manager over in the Victoria Infirmary and this is a woman who essentially started the high dependency unit and a very, very experienced nurse with absolutely terrific skills in that area and regularly wipes files off the machine, destroys documents, loses databases, just everything. I think for a lot of people it is computers, it is a fear of computers. There's something about computing that just instils some kind of fear in them. What we see a lot with absolute beginners, that comes out very often is a mistaken fear that they can actually destroy our computers, that they can do some damage by pressing the wrong key or pressing the wrong mouse button. I'm explaining to learners that the only people who can really damage machines are people that know how to damage machines like hackers etc. who know how to go in and wipe out a hard drive etc. Pressing the shift key when you meant to press the enter key isn't going to cause the machine to blow up. Some of them do come with such a fear that they actually think they're going to in some way damage the machines by getting things wrong and you have to take that away from them and show them really that there's not going to be a fateful consequence from hitting the wrong key or hitting the wrong mouse button so you're dealing with issues like that from beginners. But I think the fear is not so much just a general lack of confidence, it is a fear of computers, of technology, I think by and large.

Evelyn: *That's really interesting because actually one of the people I interviewed said something very like that. She said her husband bought a computer and she was afraid to touch it in case she would "break it". So that was exactly what you've been saying. So these people are complete beginners. These will be people that have missed out, not of the generation obviously who got computers at schools, they've just missed out on it.*
Jim: *A lot of learners who have done a job for a large number of years and who have always had someone, once PCs and once Windows came in and everyone had to become computer literate, well we had a person who done that for them.*
With the doctors who you know are obviously very, very clever people who actually would struggle to right click on the mouse, with no exaggeration

because they have had someone that deals with… and again to me if a doctor is so sort of scared, then that really does show that it is about technology, that there's something about computers that instils a fear in people.
Can you repeat the question?

Evelyn: *The question was the challenges that you face with learners, so you were focusing on the challenges with beginners.*
Jim: *With absolute beginners. Another main challenge is the fact that we do offer so many courses all of the time, that we offer all of the courses every day and in some sessions you can literally be dragged all over the place from SAGE accounts to ECDL to ECDL Advanced to Word to Excel to the beginners course back to ECDL – you really do have to be on your toes and there are some sessions that can be quite exhausting if you have that mix of learners where there's a real variation, where you have a mix of beginners and competent learners and a real mix of the courses they're doing, you really do have to be on your toes and it is a challenge.*
My sort of goal which I've kind of set out is that I always like to go over and sit down with a learner and solve the problem confidently as if immediately, you know I don't even need to look at the actual page or anything and that instils confidence in them but given that we've got so many courses and literally thousands (if you counted it up) of potential stumbling blocks if you put all the courses together, to actually go over and do that, it takes a lot, you really have to keep on top of the subject matter and you have to try and always second guess where certain learners are going to trip up.
But that is a challenge; we do have sessions that you really do have to be on the ball. I think since we brought in the SAGE courses which require a completely different level of support and now the ever increasing profile of ECDL Advanced and some of the more advanced separate courses like Access and PowerPoint etc. so that certainly is a challenge as basically making sure that everyone gets the support that they need during that session.
Evelyn: *Yes, it's quite a different challenge from other areas in the college. It's completely different really, rather than simply having to teach one course.*

Question 11.

Evelyn: *If you had the resources to make big changes in the FLC, what would you do?*
Jim: *Well the first thing I would do is certainly increase the staffing, I think it's the priority. My pipe dream would be have the centre operating on the two floors of the Litehouse and basically bring in as many new courses as we can facilitate but I think staffing would have to be number one.*
I would also like, this isn't necessarily to do with money, to see us working better with other areas within the college, particularly the Business Development Unit and have us properly marketed, especially to small businesses because I think there are a lot of people out there who would

actually be impressed with what we do and would be pleased if they sent their employees to us, but it's actually getting them in in the first place.

But just general points, I would increase the staff, increase the size of the centre and I would increase the courses and possibly diversify into other areas away from computing as well as computing. It will still be core business for us for many years to come.

Evelyn: *What sort of areas would you think?*
Jim: *Good question. I think certainly, well things that tie in with what we do just now could be actual Accounts, is something that we could be doing. Now this may require, you know if we had the sort of dream scenario of a two floor building, you know actually doing separate things in separate parts of that building so we could maybe be taking an Accounts class somewhere. We could be bringing back Maths and English etc. and offering them through flexible learning and then all the soft skills that everyone is talking about today, there could be something on that.*

Question 12.

Evelyn: *Tell me about how you think the centre should be marketed*
Jim: *Well a lot better than it is just now. We should be being sold to small businesses as this place that they can send their employees to at a time that suits them. We should have a much higher profile within the guide on the website and even in the lifestyle guide, everywhere. We should arguably be the most marketed part of the college because we don't have that ready sort of batch of learners who are going to be queuing up for most of the other courses every August.*

We have to go out and draw our learners into the centre. We compete with half a dozen learning centres in the South Side so we really should be marketed accordingly. There are still people in this local area who don't know what we do who don't know that Hollypark has a flexible learning centre where they can come and study at their own pace at their own time and I've had local residents saying that since I started, as recently as last month.

Evelyn: *How could we reach out and let people know that do you think?*
Jim: *Ideally, if funds weren't an issue we would have an actual person to take care of all this. I think this comes back to the job proposal that Don had toyed with a few years ago which was a learning centre development officer. I think that would be fantastic if we actually had our own person who went out and aggressively marketed us, who went out to businesses having done presentations, who ensured that we were high profile in all the college literature, who went out to community events etc., who went and networked with other learning centres and colleges. So an actual person to effectively oversee our development I think would be tremendous.*

Question 13.

Evelyn: *What are your hopes for the centre in the future?*
Jim: *Well, to keep the momentum that we have going because I think we're running the centre very well. I think we're running it almost like a business in terms of making sure that we're paid for courses and we have proper procedures and people are accountable and that's very important. But we're also running it with in my opinion, high quality teaching and learning so to keep the momentum going and to take it even further. To take it further would require the things that we've just spoken about, would require certainly one extra member of staff and maybe some extra resources and basically to expand what we do just now. I would like to see us similar to the way things operate in the American community colleges where what they would call flexible learning centres appear to be very much at the heart of the operation as opposed to hidden away and misunderstood.*

Evelyn: *How do you think we can sort of win hearts and minds in the college itself?*
Jim: *I think it's difficult because a lot of staff are up to their eyes in their own things and that's just a fact, but I think we just keep plugging away. We've made a lot of in-roads recently I would say; we have increased the profile of the centre but for me it just comes down to things like making sure that Yusef or I always do a session at the staff development conference, at least bringing some staff in to see the place, making sure that we do have a good profile within the Guide. I managed to squeeze into it this year obviously in a staff profile and completely abused the text I was asked to write, but was just talking about the centre so that's fine!*
But I think it's difficult, I think we need to be realistic and say that a lot of staff have their own things to deal with and that's always going to be the case but certainly just keep trying and I think just that if we keep doing what we do well, if we all keep running the centre well and really putting everything into it, reputation is established. It's sort of become a place that someone will say "I went over to see whatever Yusef or Jim", "Oh aye someone done that", even just that sort of chat filtering through the college building up that we are a place that's good basically, it's something.

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APPENDIX 9 :

DATABASE ANALYSIS

Database information

The following information is drawn from the Further Education Statistical information available on UnitE, the college database. The number of learners is actually lower than it should be because difficulties in reconciling a system of flexible enrolment with the college enrolment system meant that those whose courses spanned across college sessions were not recorded as enrolled for the second session.

The following information appeared on a first analysis:

Table 1a. Gender breakdown

Session	No of males	No of females	Total
2005/6	125 (41.39%)	175 (58.61%)	302
2006/7	130 (37.46%)	217 (62.54%)	347

Notes: In each year, therefore female learners outnumbered males, by 25% in 2006/7 and 17% in 2005/6. This is a slightly higher percentage of females than the overall picture for FE where 57% of students were female according to ASC keyfacts 2006. The group where numbers of males and females were equal in 2006/7 was in the over 65s.

Table 1b. Ethnic breakdown of Learners

Session	No of Ethnic Minority Origin	Others	Total
2005/6	20 (7%)	282 (93%)	302
2006/7	25 (7%)	322 (93%)	347

Table 2. Age breakdown of Learners

2005/6	16-19	20-30	31-39	40-49	50-65	Over 65
Males	4	9	22	32	46	9 (oldest 86)
Females	3	8	26	54	72	11 (oldest 74)
2006/7	**16-19**	**20-30**	**31-39**	**40-49**	**50-65**	**Over 65**
Males	7	13	13	31	48	19 (oldest 85
Females	5	21	24	72	75	19 (oldest 81

Notes: Where the learner profile is markedly different from the overall FE picture is in the age profile.

In 2005/6 96% of learners were over 25 and in 2006/7 the percentage was 87%. This compared with the sector figure of 58% of learners over 25 in 2006 and 56% nationally in 2007. The preponderance of older learners contrasts with the college as a whole and is something which several interviewees have mentioned as being reassuring to them.

The average age of learners was 47.5 in 2005/6, and 47.71 in 2006/7, markedly higher than the sector average of 32. This raises questions about the role of employability as a driver for learners who are markedly older than the average FE student. It also possibly reflects the experience of older workers who are faced with redundancy after years of employment or who are struck by ill health.

Table 3a. Learners from outwith Glasgow City 2005/6

Home	Council Area	Miles from college	Number of learners
Giffnock	East Renfrewshire	4	14
Thornliebank	East Renfrewshire	4	4
Eaglesham	East Renfrewshire	8	9
Clarkston	East Renfrewshire	4	16
Barrhead	East Renfrewshire	8	1
Carmunock	East Renfrewshire	6	3
Newton Mearns	East Renfrewshire	7	14
Renfrew	Renfrewshire	9	1
Paisley	Renfrewshire	7	1
Bishopton	Renfrewshire	11	1
Bearsden	East Dunbartonshire	12	3
Uddingston	North Lanarkshire	9	1
Cambuslang	North Lanarkshire	7	6
Rutherglen	North Lanarkshire	4	14
East Kilbride	South Lanarkshire	8	9
Thorntonhall	South Lanarkshire	8	1
Hamilton	South Lanarkshire	15	2
Stewarton	East Ayrshire	10	1
Waterside	East Ayrshire	20	1

Notes: In 2005/6, 210 of the 302 learners came from Glasgow City (69%). 166 of these lived on the South Side of the city within a four mile radius of the centre (55% of total learners).

East Renfrewshire accounted for the biggest number of learners from outside Glasgow. With the exception of Barrhead, this is an affluent largely middle class area. In contrast Rutherglen and Cambuslang have pockets of affluence.

In 2006/7, 203 of the 347 learners came from Glasgow City (58.5%), which was a drop on previous years. 176 lived on the South Side of the City (50.7%), a drop on the previous session.

Table 3b. Comparison over two years of those outwith Glasgow City

Address	Council	2005/6	2006/7
Giffnock	East Renfrewshire	14	12
Thornliebank	East Renfrewshire	4	0
Eaglesham	East Renfrewshire	9	6
Clarkston	East Renfrewshire	16	22
Barrhead	East Renfrewshire	1	2
Carmunock	East Renfrewshire	3	0
Newton Mearns	East Renfrewshire	14	20
Neilston	East Renfrewshire	0	1
Renfrew	Renfrewshire	1	1
Uplawmoor	Renfrewshire	0	1
Paisley	Renfrewshire	1	5
Lochwinnoch	Renfrewshire	0	0
Johnstone / Houston	Renfrewshire	0	0
Bishopton	Renfrewshire	1	0
Kilsyth	North Lanarkshire	0	0
Lugton	East Ayrshire	0	1
High Bonnybridge	North Lanarkshire	0	0
Bearsden	East Dunbartonshire	3	1
Bishopbriggs	East Dunbartonshire	0	1
Chryston	North Lanarkshire	0	0
Bothwell	South Lanarkshire	0	0
Uddingston	South Lanarkshire	1	1
Cambuslang	South Lanarkshire	6	8
Bellshill	South Lanarkshire	0	1
Blantyre	South Lanarkshire	0	1
Rutherglen	South Lanarkshire	14	36
East Kilbride	South Lanarkshire	9	4
Thorntonhall	South Lanarkshire	1	0
Motherwell	South Lanarkshire	0	0
Hamilton	South Lanarkshire	2	2
Lesmahagow	South Lanarkshire	0	0
Larkhall	South Lanarkshire	0	0
Irvine	North Ayrshire	0	0
Ayr	South Ayrshire	0	0
Port Glasgow	Inverclyde	0	0
Stewarton	East Ayrshire	1	0
Waterside	East Ayrshire	1	0
Armadale	West Lothian	0	1
Millport	Isle of Cumbrae	0	1

Table 3c. Distance from learners' home to college 2006/7

District	Miles from college	No. of learners
Giffnock	4	12
Thornliebank	4	0
Eaglesham	8	6
Clarkston	4	22
Carmunock	6	0
Kittochside	8	1
Newton Mearns	7	20
Barrhead	9	2
Paisley	7	5
Neilston	11	1
Renfrew	9	1
Uplawmoor	12	1
Bearsden	12	1
Lugton	12	1
Bishopbriggs	9	1
Cambuslang	7	8
Cumbernauld	16	2
Moodiesburn		2
Rutherglen	14	36
Uddingston	10	1
East Kilbride	8	4
Blantyre	10	1
Strathhaven	15	3
Hamilton	15	2
Bellshill		1
Armadale		1
Millport	30 plus ferry	1

Notes: One surprising trend is variations in the number of learners from Rutherglen rising from 14 to 36. This may be related to classes of classroom assistants from local councils who do a distance IT module.

Table 4a. Learners from Deprived area post codes

District	2005/6	2006/7
G22.5 Greater Possil	1	0
G33.4 Easterhouse	1	0
G45.9 Castlemilk	12	6
G5.0 Gorbals/Oatlands	1	0
G45.0 Castlemilk	6	2
G21.4 Balornock	2	0
G31.3 Haghill	1	1
G40.4 Bridgeton	1	0
G21.1 Sighthill	2	0
G22.6 Greater Possil	1	1
G53.5 Pollok	2	1
G33.3 Cranhill	1	1
G51.4 Drumoyne	1	1
G14.0 Yoker`	1	0
G46.8 Carnwadric	6	5
G32.7 Tollcross	2	0
G42.7 E Pollokshields/Govanhill	8	4
G5.9 Gorbals	0	1
G53.7 S Nitshill	1	2
G72.0 Blantyre	0	1
G51.1 Govan	3	3
G42.0 Toryglen	19	4
G40.2 Bridgeton	1	0
G31.1 Dennistoun	1	0
G20.0 Maryhill	1	0
G20.8 Maryhill	1	0
G73.1 W Rutherglen	4	3
G42.8 Govanhill	25	10
G52.4 Penilee	0	1
G32.8 Tollcross	1	0
G4.0 Townhead	1	0
G40.1 Dalmarnock	1	0
G13.3 Knightswood	0	1
G72.7 NW Cambuslang	2	4
ML4.2 Bellshill	0	1
G52.1 Pollok	0	2
G3.8 Kelvinhall	1	0
G42.9 Battlefield/Mt Florida	39	21
G43.1 Hillpark/Pollokshaws	15	9
G41.1 Kinning Park	3	2
G33.2 Riddrie	0	1
G69.7 Baillieston	3	0
G12.8 Partick	0	0
ML3.9 Hamilton	2	2
G41.2 Pollokshaws/Shawlands	17	14
G73.5 Rutherglen	2	3
PA2.8 Paisley Potterhill	0	3
TOTALS	191	110

Table 4b. Percentage of learners from deprived areas

District	2005/6	2006/7
Deprived areas	63%	31.5%

Notes: Altogether 203 learners came from the 20% most deprived areas, i.e. 67%. According to the Index of Deprivation, parts of the area of the college post code is included in the 10% most deprived areas. This is surprising as the area would usually be considered mainly middle class with a mix of traditional red sandstone tenements, some council flats from the 1950s and three multi storey flats along with one or two traditional stone terraces. There may have been a demographic change in this area with the use of more flats bought for rent which may be made available to DHSS tenants. The district has many neglected small front gardens which when I was growing up in this area were well tended with families staying in flats for long periods of time.

110 learners came from the 15% most deprived areas, 31% of the total compared with a sector average of 26%. This was a huge drop on the previous year. Biggest drops were in learners from Toryglen and Govanhill, both of which had their own outlying campuses.

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