The adventure of self in FE classrooms: Ithaca and Odyssey revisited

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This article describes the outcome of a small-scale study of five adults learning in the FE sector in Scotland. The purpose of the research was to explore the relationship between learning and identity in relation to these five key participants. Although I engaged with groups of students and their teachers I focused primarily on five volunteers from within these groups in two colleges in the central belt. I used a biographical and interpretative approach to consider matters of identity in relation to these individuals, and I used semi-structured interviews with them, the wider student groups and their teachers to explore perceptions and experiences of learning and whether learning had led to changes in them. Although there was evidence of some permanence in the identities of the five learners I found that in the main their identities were situated, constructed and practised. I also found that learning processes and experiences in the classroom were as significant to them as other major self-making events in their lives. Their inherent dialogicality and its articulation through dialogical processes were evident in their accounts of the forging of their identities in their current learning settings and in their wider lives. It was clear that these specific learning settings, through the use of dialogue as the major learning tool and varied learner groupings, promoted these learners' dialogicality and offered opportunities for them to affirm selves and to construct and practise new selves. Their accounts also show that their views of their histories, their current situations and their futures were reframed as a result of changes to and enactment of selves in the learning context. My overall conclusion is that these learning settings were highly significant in relation to these five individuals, for understanding, practising and making their identities.

> *Learning is……a participatory act; a profoundly social and cultural phenomenon, not simply a cognitive process… (Bloomer & Hodkinson 2000).*

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES AND ORIGINS

Throughout a childhood where my mother would have had more freedoms without me, my relationship as a thirteen year old with an adult, my piano teacher – who spoke to me, was interested in how I felt, could somehow intuit my unexpressed, and not only guess at but create aspirations that went far beyond the dark days of adult divorce, and the continual muted mutterings of the rosary by a ferocious Italian grandmother – brought to me the greatest joy I ever

experienced. Through this personal connection, I had my first real encounter with classical music. My pleasure as I dug ever deeper to articulate tenderness and fragility and to infuse those rich notes below middle C with my own spiritual breath, grew with hers. She didn't need to say anything- I felt it and responded. I looked at her and flew. She took me somewhere else: to a place unimagined and in the doing, gave me the greatest gift I have ever had. In those moments, I was transformed; I was in another place and anything was possible. I learned about me, I saw what I could be and I learned about those rare transactions between two people which involve all but the use of speech. That learning gave me a life of my own, distinct from the suffocating convent classrooms around us; it distanced the loneliness and terrors of my home life; it formed an inner voice which has not only sustained me throughout my life but has helped me to challenge and to forge and to re configure. Not surprisingly then, it was the process of learning which I wanted to understand as a researcher. I wanted to explore the human experience of it; how learning can touch people and compel them so profoundly, that new lives and ways of being present themselves.

BEYOND THE LEARNING LITERATURE

Apple (1987) views education as a powerful tool which represents and acts on behalf of a dominant group within society, their values and beliefs: 'education is caught up in the real world of shifting and unequal power relations' (p.viii). 'School' he writes (1987: 42) 'is not a passive mirror, but an active force, one that also serves to give legitimacy to economic and social forms and ideologies so intimately connected with it'. The societal rules which govern behaviour, social attitudes, morals and beliefs are filtered down from the macro level of economic and political structures to the individual via work experience, educational processes and family socialisation (Apple 1976: 33). Sarup (1982) writes about the politicisation of the education system since 1976, through direct state intervention and control of teacher training, the curriculum and assessment in order that education can be used to support the economy and in particular provide the required labour market. He argues that education acts as a filter creating different hierarchies of skills including an unskilled workforce in order to meet market needs. He refers specifically (1982: 4) to educational institutions which play a crucial role in reproducing socio-economic systems and in the production of human capital through the inculcation of skills and knowledge on the one hand and on the social transmission of varying levels of ignorance on the other. Bourdieu suggests that through 'structuring' and organising, (1990: 53) the *habitus* of the classroom makes the learning context a mechanism for maintaining the status quo and a certain vision of society. It could be argued that these theories are supported by the high level of literacies needs in Scotland as reported in Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (ALNIS) (SE 2001). This report defines literacy as an ability to function or participate in community and working life and states that the number of adults whose levels of literacy and numeracy prevent them from leading full lives and whose literacies levels affect their health, housing and personal and social relationships, is in excess of 800,000.

While I am aware of this literature which defines education as a means of political intervention to reproduce and maintain rather than lessen, the inequalities of society, my own conceptual framework for a research project was based on an entirely different ontology; a literature of ideals and optimism; the potential of education and learning not to maintain levels of societal inequality, but to transform individuals through human interactions within the learning context. Fullan (1993) for example, suggests that teachers should 'see themselves and be seen as experts in the dynamics of change'. He goes on to suggest that a fundamental purpose of learning is to satisfy the greatest need of people to 'find and give meaning to life'. Hooks (1994) also subscribes to this profoundly meaningful and transforming role of learning: 'I am often most joyous in the classroom, brought closer here to the ecstatic than by most of life's experiences … the academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations remains a location of possibility'. As an example of the kind of change that learning can bring about, she describes the effect on young black women including herself, of being educated in an all-black school; the excitement of a 'transgressive' school experience which fundamentally changed them, legitimised colour, liberated and prepared them to challenge rather than submit to an ethnically prejudiced society. Moving beyond the educational theorists, the literature on collaborative research might effectively be applied to the learning process. Heron's work in particular, refers to the potential for personal transformation through interactions with other researchers in pursuit of a common and jointly agreed objective: 'it (collaborative research) is a vision of persons in reciprocal relation using the full range of their sensibilities to inquire together into any aspect of the human condition with which the transparent body-mind can engage' (1996:1). He refers to what he describes as 'empathetic resonance' (1996: 21) which generates both the research motive and act; to tacit knowing through participation, leading to 'human flourishing' (p.11). Personal transformation is arrived at in research, through being 'with you, alongside you, empathising with you; and yet not losing myself in confluence with you because the dialogue between us both bridges and preserves our differences' (Reason 1988, cited by Heron, 1996: 21).

Change and transformation as an outcome of learning are also fundamental to Wenger (1998). His focus is on the process of change itself and how identity is constructed within learning settings. His view of learning as a social activity makes learning an 'an experience of identity' (p.215).Learning forms who we are, and learning is personally and socially transformative. Lave and Wenger (1991: 49) write: 'knowing is inherent in the growth and transformation of identities'; learning, transformation and identity in their view, are conceptually linked. It therefore follows that learning as a process is integrated within the self and the agency of self in social settings. Learning therefore has a social outcome; and is a mix of inner and external activity. It is a force for change and transformation and is the dynamic through which individual and group identities formed.

The concept of identity is highly contested with different definitions spanning many literatures including that of the social sciences, philosophy and psychology. Despite this, and in my view, the scant attention paid to the concept by educationists, my own interest and reading on the subject have led me to adopt a

social and constructivist definition. For me identity is the social practice of self as set out by Holland *et al.* (1998) and Holland and Lave (2001) and, when applied to the classroom, offers some new and interesting perspectives on how the classroom may be both viewed and configured. Their view of identity is that it is generally constructed rather than stable (1998: 27); it is situated, and a continually improvised response to the social environment. Identity is made in the 'flow of activity within specific social situations … from the cultural resources at hand' (1998: 4). It is the forged through and within a social and historical context of relationships and events. It therefore carries the imprints of a life-history as well as representing a generative base 'from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being' (p. 5). As constructed and continually self-making, it follows that we are constantly dialogical. Our openness to others is always accompanied by reflection, review and re-construction. We combine our 'intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations' (1998: 5) around us. We bring to that interaction our history and our local circumstances. It is this process of dialogicality, of a reaction to otherness, in which our cultural systems, inner speech and 'inner activity' (1998: 8) are all in play, which leads to self-making and a practice of self. These views invite us to regard the learning context then as a social space for identities to occupy, unfold, remake themselves and to interconnect.

The theme of otherness, which emerges as a key factor in identity making is also central to Bruner's (1996) view of knowledge construction; and dialogicality and the individual's dialogical relationship are fundamental to Marková's (2003) view of the construction of knowledge and to the making of identity as an integral outcome of that process. The interplay between the discrete forces of self, other and the object of knowledge and the impact of them as one tightly bonded interacting entity, which Marková describes (2003: 150) as 'both simultaneously and sequentially dynamic' led me ultimately to a more precise view of dialogicality which was central to my research project. Marková, states that dialogicality is 'as much part of human nature as are the biological and cognitive universals' (2003: 91). My understanding and one which informed my subsequent activities is that dialogicality is an inherent human characteristic; an openness to and an engagement with the world. This openness to, and engagement with, the world has at its source a constant, dynamic and generative inner process of reflection and review of selves in relation to others. Understandings of selves, definitions of selves, perceptions of selves, construction and affirmation of selves emerge from, and are developed through dialogicality. Dialogicality is a central means through which individuals forge and practise identity. It is articulated through the dialogical processes of action, word, deed, improvisation and response as part of the struggles and harmonies of social relationships between people in the process of constructing knowledge. In Marková's terms the combined force of self, other and social knowledge as a dialogical unit is a powerful dynamic through which changed self, *Ego-Alter-Altered Ego*, and changed 'worlds' (p.173) are achieved.

These linked concepts from different literatures and the relationship which many of these theorists perceived between learning and identity construction and practice, addressed my original objective which was to explore the human

dimension within learning and provided me with a research topic. My research questions were specifically:

- to what extent were the identities of the five key participants made or practised in the learning process?
- what was the role of the learning process and classroom environment in terms of their identity and self-making?
- to what extent did learning in these specific learning contexts have an impact on their self-making?
- to what extent did they feel comfortable in their learning contexts; how much did they change through learning?

CHARTING THE TERRAIN

Let me now turn to some of the core values which shaped my research design and my methodology. It seemed to me to be important that my research activities focused on individuals and their contexts and that my engagements with them were founded on a relationship of trust. Oakley (1981) suggests that women researching women are non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal in their approach and that a befriending approach is common. It was important for me certainly, to adopt a research strategy of standing alongside my research participants, offering affirmations and where appropriate sharing my own experiences, and vulnerabilities. My aim was to be interactive (Furlong & Edwards 1986: 56) and build a human relationship, which would encourage them to 'tell it as it is'. Furthermore, Lather (1991) suggests that research should have 'catalytic validity'. I have always been aware in my work in Scottish education of the need to give adequate voice to those for whom education policy is made. As an HMI I had an opportunity through my research, to represent participants' views and to disseminate any research conclusions at the highest levels of decision-making. It was therefore crucially important for me to keep faith with them and to respect the confidences they shared with me in the hope that common good would come from our work together. Equally important for me, was the potential of those engagements to 'raise them up'; to provide spaces for them to build self-esteem through their chosen narratives about their lives and their learning experience.

The choice of FE as a site for my research was in some ways both a pragmatic one because of my familiarity with the sector as an HMI and a considered one. The articulated experience of practitioners and managers in FE in Scotland which are well-documented in a number of HMIE reports such as *Student Learning in Scottish Further Education* (HMIE 2004) and *Changing Lives* (HMIE 2005), have all highlighted transformation and change as the one of the most significant outcomes of learning. They all suggest that FE is a unique trigger for major life changes for second chance learners – adults returning for a first qualification, and for school leavers with a negative first learning experience at school. Gallacher et al.'s work part of a TLRP research project also suggest transformations in the learning cultures (2006) of individuals learning in community-based FE contexts in Scotland; and the development of learning identities of those 'least inclined to learn' (2002).

An informal consultative process with several colleges resulted in my choice of two learning settings in the central belt of Scotland in which to conduct my field

work: an *Access to Teaching* course for learners who wished to gain Highers and progress to a university degree; and an HNC Social Studies course for care workers who were required to seek a qualification in order to continue to practise. Identifying research sites was a spontaneous process of meeting and engagement with key staff and learners in colleges. After a short pilot and some preliminary discussions with learners from both the school and FE sectors, the doctoral research which has led to the findings set out in this article, took place from February to June, 2005. I had a number of 'getting to know you' meetings with both classes with and without the lecturer present. I observed both classes two or three times and followed this by two one-to-one meetings of about one and half hours on each occasion with the participants in a separate location within the college. Of eighteen volunteers, the number of participants settled at five who had the time to commit to two to three hours of interviews of focused discussion about their life-histories and their learning. I have named them Anthea, Bob, Catherine, Evelyn and Freda. Additionally, I conducted interviews on learning with four additional volunteers, Kathleen, Elaine, Claire and Kara; with two focus groups and with the three teachers of the groups involved. This qualitative and biographical approach led me to some common conclusions about the identities of the key participants. Additionally, by working from a common topic set with them as well as the wider group of learners and teachers, through comparing their individual and group accounts I was able to answer the research questions I had started with.

ANALYSING DATA AND ISSUES OF TRUST

I approached the analysis of my data using a combination of interpretation and 'imagination' (Erben 1998: 9-12), making connections between statements, ideas and events and systematic analysis. For the analysis of individual identities based on the narratives of the five key participants, Anthea, Bob, Catherine, Evelyn and Freda and their accounts of what events had made them who they were, I drew heavily on Riessman (1993) who writes: 'individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives' (p.2). She argues that narratives are in themselves interpretative, and constructed in such a way as to convey certain messages. I was then subject to what 'informants' (Riesssman 1993: 1) did with me.

I also used a 'constant comparative method' (Silverman 2000) in analysing participants' use of language in terms of identities presented, enacted, envisioned. I proceeded from one account to the other, arriving at understandings and comparing perceptions of each new account to preceding understandings. In Denzin's (1989) view, language is a glaze through which to see into the 'window' of a person's inner life. I therefore drew on Dossena (2005) as a means of interpreting the language used by participants and in particular their use of the vernacular.

In order to analyse the data on learning which emerged from the second discussions (with the five key participants, and from interviews with their teachers, with the learners' group and with the four additional participants) I compared the views of all participants systematically in relation to: their understandings and definitions of learning, its purpose and their expectations of

it, classroom relationships, how they felt about others in the class and how comfortable they were in their learning settings, what evidence of change they saw in themselves and what factors had led to change. Working with the data from each of the five discussions in turn, I noted commonalities and perceptions which were individual.

I applied the same constant comparative approach to the data from group discussions, interviews with individual learners who were not key participants and interviews with teachers. I continually cross-referred across sets of data from each as well as referring back to the conclusions from the previous data from the five key participants. Classroom observations also provided further data in which to contextualise and compare these views. This method of analysis allowed for generalisation in relation to these common themes and for identifying difference.

A third stage in analysing the totality of the data was to relate and compare the set of findings on identity to the other set of findings on learning and change; to fuse the 'imaginative recreation of the quotidian' (Erben 1998: 12) on the one hand with a straightforward comparison approach on the other. The first phase consisted of reaching a view of how the identities of the five key participants were forged and practised, of what aspects of their identities were permanent, what remained hidden and what was forefronted at certain times. I also reached a view in that initial phase of how these participants built selves. I was subsequently able from my analysis of the second set of data to form a view of the identities of these participants, and of how they constructed selves, in their learning settings. I was able to identify, what aspects of self were visible; how they went about their self-making; what changes were apparent or in progress; what the factors for change in learning settings were; and how findings from these data compared to data from interviews with teachers and other learners. This cross-referencing allowed me to address the central research topic which was to explore the relationship between learning and identity.

Mishler's (1990) view is that validation is 'situated' within communities and contexts of professional practice and 'embedded' (p.419).What is important in his view is the degree of trustworthiness ascribed by a wider network of practitioner/specialists to a particular set of data and the research process through a conviction inspired by the 'visibility' of the work carried out. Their acting on the findings is evidence of their faith and trust. My engagement with practitioners and HMI colleagues at all stages has been central to my work. These engagements which took place themselves in different learning spaces, at different times and which were themselves characterised by my own dialogicality and dialogical processes of interaction, reflection and communication have not only influenced and continue to influence the findings of this project – it remains work in progress. But they have also influenced the development of learning and teaching approaches and the inspection of them in the FE sector across Scotland. Finally, it is worth noting that that learning space which I continue to inhabit with colleagues and practitioners remains one in which I constantly reframe, review and re-present my changed and changing identities as an outcome of these interactions.

PRESENTING THE FIVE KEY PARTICIPANTS

Anthea, then aged 43 was a care worker studying for an HNC in Social Care. Hers was a mining background. She left school at 15 to care for sick relatives. She fell in love with Drew and lived with him for fourteen years before telling him to leave because of his gambling addiction. He had died very suddenly, a few years before she embarked on her college course. In earlier years, she had been a competition dancer; had worked in London in the construction industry and had a love of music, art and the countryside.

Bob was aged 25. He had attended a military boarding school before going on to college to do Highers and then an HND in Sports Coaching. He signed up for the Marines but then left after a short time because of pressure from his partner Doreen. He was a care worker in a residential school for young people and at the time of our discussions, was working towards an HNC in Social Care. His mother had also recently died.

Catherine, aged 35 was studying for Highers at college in order to gain access to a teaching course at Edinburgh University. She is a mother of three children and was married to Graeme. She was very anxious to put her difficult upbringing, of an alcohol-dependant mother behind her which led to her feelings of isolation.

Evelyn was 46. She was a care worker and aspired to counselling as a career after gaining her HNC in Social Care. Her husband had been a miner and both had been very much part of a mining community eventually torn apart during the miners strike in the eighties. She had worked in a warehouse for eighteen years before embarking on a college course.

Freda was 38 and was married with two children. She had been adopted from the age of two, had suffered sexual and physical abuse by her adoptive father and had during the time of our work together, a strong religious faith. She was a care worker studying for an HNC in Social Care.

Catherine's course was full-time. Those on the Social Care course were part-time students who were combining study with work.

THE FINDINGS: UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY

Consistent with Holland *et al.'s* (1998) and Holland and Lave's (2001) social practice and constructivist view of identity, I found that the identities of these five participants were constructed, practised, variable and unreliable. Their identities were neither coherent nor consistent. Their social, personal and professional interactions throughout their lives, had led to contradictory and complex self-definitions, self-affirmations and continually to new aspects of selves. Each individual was the sum of his or her life experience.

Within every new situation in their histories, they had improvised their identities and presentations of selves; and they had explored new identities in response to how they understood their relationship to others in those particular contexts. I was also aware that identity and self-making were for them, an ongoing and primary objective in all that they undertook. These individuals were on a self-making journey, moving from event to event, relationships to relationship, and place to place in order to make new selves, and to affirm or test out their understandings of their identities. These decisions to locate themselves

tirelessly in a series of different contexts and life situations were both planned as well as spontaneous.

I also found however, that openness to others, reflectiveness, review, reconstruction and representation of self was an enduring aspect to their self-understandings and self-practice in their life contexts. Holland *et al.* (1998) refer to the permanency of 'cultural logic' which continually drives people from the self-making to self-making contexts, events, experiences and relationships of their lives. My findings confirmed this and in addition, this process of dialogicality was also a permanent aspect of their identities. It was a reliable, central means whereby issues relating to their identities were addressed, organised and articulated. The process of identity-making, perceiving, understanding and deciding to enact these conceptualisations was externalised through the actions and use of words within the context of a set of relationships or a response to an individual. Social contact was therefore central to self-making and to decisions as to what identity to enact. Furthermore, contact with certain others within the domestic or professional spheres of their lives was particularly significant. They were able to exert an influence which generated fundamental changes to participants' identities, to presentations of aspects of their identities and to the choices they made in relation to the direction of their lives. In the light of these findings, the social context of the classroom becomes an altogether more contested and highly significant series of events which may potentially be critical to the individual.

THE CLASSROOM AS A SPACE FOR UNDERSTANDING, PRACTISING AND MAKING IDENTITIES

Before presenting the key factors within the classroom environment which influenced change in these learners' lives, I want to dwell on how they approached their learning. Some of the preliminary work which I did before the field work consisted of discussion and focus group work with other learners drawn from a school in the north of Scotland. Emma, a fifth year pupil expressed the views of her group well: 'in class there is no space for identity…it would get in the way…you have to tome yourself down, become one of the group'. By way of contrast, here are some extracts from the accounts of the key participants in my research who are addressing the issue of why they returned to learning and what they sought from it. The main theme in all of what they said is how open they were to change.

Freda said:

> I know who I am in some respects but I'm struggling to develop who I really am because possibly because of my past and what not. And as I said, the death of mum has launched me into really finding Freda in some ways. So I think I'm still in the process of really finding the confidence to be where I am, rather than em, being what or who everybody else thought or expected me to be. It's (learning) a finding process.

Anthea said:

> So I came up from London and I phoned my brothers and I says no, I've had enough, that's it I'm gonna look for other work… never thinking I'm gonna get back

into caring . that was three years in June…..I just don't know if there will ever gonna be a time when I'm gonna ever really find the real me because I'm always going aboot open tae other things and as long as I leave myself open tae experience other things, how can I be the real me because I'm always gonna be learning and taking on mair knowledge and …so that's why I never really can see the real me because I'll never live tae see it because I'll never know….as a person I change, I don't see these people the same way….

Bob said:

Maybe you just get to that stage where you feel like a change…Then I'd been speaking to a friend that worked near me and she said, why don't you just apply…it's your career that develops who you are rather than your friends and family.. I think we (the people in the class) all have a common goal because we're all there for personal development, to better ourselves, for better careers. It's personality that makes me change (attitude).

Evelyn described the process of reaching an important decision to change her life thus:

I was looking at the people around me, a lot of the women I was friendly with are a wee bit older than me, that I worked beside, they're maybe all in their like mid to late fifties and about to retire and they were quite happy just to carry on with the job you know, to be retiring and pensioned and what have you. And I thought I don't really want to work her for the rest of my life you know what I mean.. I want to do something different that I enjoy doing. I decided I've got a brain in my head, I want to do something a bit more.. they said there was an Introduction to Psychology and that followed on to an NC in Sociology.. (the interest developed possibly through) my mother who had depression from whenever I can remember back.. and my daughter suffers from depression.

Catherine said:

I want…..for personal satisfaction, I would like to have a degree because my husband has one and most of my friends have one, I kind of mix in an environment where most people have that kind of educational background and I would like to as well….sometimes you feel a little bit inferior you know…you think well yeah, I haven't had the opportunity. Given the opportunity I know I can do that as well. So I would like to and it is very much a personal challenge. It would give me an awful lot of personal satisfaction to achieve that.

For these learners, the learning process was very clearly a life-changing and self-making event. Identity change and a change in their perception of their identities past and future, was central to their intentions in returning to learning and education. Within the ever-changing social environments of the classroom and through the experience of the continually evolving and fluctuating interactions of their learning setting, the learning process was a place where identity could be constructed and reconstructed. Crucially it was the willingness and openness of those entering into that learning arena which led to change and change did take place. They viewed their pasts differently, saw their futures differently. They lived what they learned, their insights and evolving identities in their daily lives and in exchange, they brought their daily lives to their learning contexts, to the formal curriculum and to their evolving selves within the

classroom. Through their agency, a rich transforming dialogue was established and maintained between their professional and personal lives and their learning experience and journey.

Catherine said she was able to accept her past, move on positively. She said, 'it's made me look at things differently .. the way I see myself. I see it (learning) as a lever to move on'. She spoke of how she was able through her experience of the classroom to engage with the new environment of professionals and graduates that she had entered through marriage. She had become an equal to her husband rather than 'doing the ironing'. She was accepted within her social circle; she was active in the school parent teachers' association. This was quite a different experience to her childhood: 'nobody would come home..their mother wouldn't let them..it's a stigma … I'm really proud of what I've done…I've been inspired by some really good teachers and that's what I want to be'. She was living a changing self and her life, relationships, self-perceptions had also changed.

Like Catherine, Evelyn's life had been transformed through learning. As the wife of a miner, she had lived very traditional roles. However, through the gradual introduction of education into her life, from warehouse worker, to a few evening classes, to a professional care worker seeking an HNC qualification, her identity, role and relationships had changed with both her husband, her son and daughter: 'although I'm quiet, I'm more confident in myself'. She was becoming a confident, able learner gaining merits for her written assignments. She was more comfortable in her classroom relationships. Her status within the home had changed; she occupied the kitchen for example while the family watched television, in order to study; she was better able to manage her daughter's clinical depression.

Bob too was more empathetic he said, towards his partner as an outcome of learning and his relationship with his father which had previously been volatile was becoming more of an exchange. He felt more at ease with women and had made good friendships, especially with an older woman called Kathleen. Professionally, he had acquired the ability to work more effectively with the parents of the boys he cared for in the residential unit where he worked.

These learners as well as those from the wider group of participants, spoke of the strong link between their learning experience and their lives outside the classroom. Catherine said: 'so I mean I've learned a lot about people that… things that I took for granted, that I realise that I'm learning more about them and understanding them better because of going into greater depth or something. Learning is just finding out things and meeting other people who are kinda… I mean I love the class now because it's people like myself… learning is just finding out more about what you're supposed to be doing'. Anthea spoke of changes to her racist attitudes through learning, and her increasing appreciation of other cultures. She spoke of her increased independence. Most importantly she said that what she had gained most from her learning experience was:

> I'm mair relaxed .. the knowledge of how tae deal wi'…situations and people.. I understand people who are all different and we all have different needs, to me this is where the education bits come in. My learning at college and things like that, has

really reconfirmed what I'd already done. I don't think I had an understandin at the time I was daein.

Freda said:

> It's (learning) endorsing what I already knew. I can't make a distinction between my faith and my work .. I can separate them for the good of my clients but I cannot separate that because that's who I am. My identity lies in my faith. It (learning) has given me a great grounding for understanding people and the diversity of people and characteristics. It's given me an outlook I wouldn't have had otherwise.

It was also clear from how learners spoke about their learning experience that although they valued the formal aspects of the learning process and the qualifications, what was most effective for their purposes was the broader learning which they engaged in through discussion and relationships in the classroom and outside it. They all spoke at length about the synergy between classroom and their own lives.

Having established that major change had taken place as a result of a learning process, that these learners felt differently about themselves, presented differently, acted differently in their lives outside the classroom as well as within it, the key issue for educators is what were the factors within these two learning settings which affected these transformations?

That same ongoing dialogical process which had been present in their self making throughout their lives was no less present in the classroom. The same characteristics of self-making, response to local circumstances and situations was as present in the classroom as in other aspects of these participants' lives. Mainly, they were self-directed and they were impelled onwards in their journeys to make identities, find identities and present aspects of themselves. These classrooms were learning spaces which were jointly owned by lecturers and learners. Learners tended to work, discuss and carry out their research or share experiences in small groups. These were generally stable groups of the learners' own making but they were also flexible. Learners were free to move around the classroom, join other groups or work with anyone they wished. At work in the moving around, in the choices learners made, the presentations of self, was dialogicality. Freda referred to 'a part of me that no one would ever get into'; she talked about not having an identity in the past; a search for who Freda is; learning as a 'finding process'. When things arose that she did not want to engage with she took 'herself out of the situation'; she moved to other groups, and significantly involved individuals in a discussion about themselves which she then compared with and related to issues and feelings within herself.

Another key factor for transformation and change which was evident in the classroom was the 'home group' where bonds were strong. Learners had marked out certain individuals who were significant for their self-making and identity. These were individuals with whom it was increasingly 'ok to say' and where they were 'at home'. They could affirm identities or explore identities and more importantly, they could learn or assimilate new aspects of selves. Whole class work was used sparingly and served mainly to expose individuals to ideas or indeed challenge from the wider group, or to introduce formality into the learning process through for example, presentations of individual research. Bob's

relationship with Kathleen her 'love child' had resulted in a more harmonious domestic environment for him. The close bonds between Anthea and two other members of her chosen group had led her to revisit and expose identities which she had left behind: her dancing and her sculpting. Evelyn returned to her academic aspirations and rediscovered her writing abilities which she turned her back on when she walked out of school for the last time. Catherine said: it really throws you if you sit in the wrong seat, like sitting next to the wrong person, whom you really like but oh…and it really changes the whole identity of the class… I don't know if that's a kind of security blanket that we've all got and we kind on know how to.. how we can be next to certain people. I mean sometimes it's harder to accept something from a person you don't particularly like, or respect and you may not really appoint any relevance to what they are saying'. These participants stated that they were 'drawn' to certain individuals and through what they described as mutuality and acceptable difference, they confirmed identities, changed or started the process of change at a fundamental level.

The main tool of transaction in these small self-making groups and more broadly, these two learning contexts, was the use of dialogue. This was very clear in all my observations and in my discussions with all learners. Teachers and learners stated that dialogue was both a central and highly effective tool in the classroom. The vernacular, the familiar and the anecdotal as well as the formal, professional and technical language all had their place within these small and wider contexts. Graumann (cited in Marková *et al.* 1995: 17) notes the difficulty in providing 'the full picture of what we share in dialogue either as a common or as a mutual world'. These were learning settings where whole-class dialogue, small group dialogue, discussion and conversation were the prime tool for learning. I observed personal exchanges, a sharing in groups of professional experience and whole class-discussion led by teachers as well as learners. I saw the use of formal language in presentations by teachers and learners and heard the use of the vernacular from both. Over time, I also observed changed language. What all three teachers did at certain times was to overlay a technical language on what learners articulated in their own words. Gradually, learners began to use these terms and registers, often in sentences which consisted mainly of a language which came more naturally. Dialogue was therefore a central means of exchanging information and sharing experiences, more importantly within different class groupings, dialogue represented a means of sharing and presenting identity, new identity, changing identity; personal, career and learning identities. Catherine's past history of having an alcoholic mother and her miserable and isolated childhood were strongly present in her exchanges within her learning group but increasingly she was able to articulate a more confident, socially adapted Catherine and an aspiring professional identity.

Alongside the spoken word, I was made very aware of the impact of unspoken communication on the practice of identity. Anthea's continuing slow struggle against her own racism was prompted by her admiration and closeness with a member of her home group and one of her tutors. Related to the potential impact of transactions which are unspoken is emotion. Feelings about the learning process, about certain 'marked' people and most of all about changed selves in

response to the learning experience were movingly conveyed in my discussions with all participants:

> you could'nae buy the feeling from anywhere… I would hate to lose this feeling. Aye, aye, suddenly you're growing. I feel as if I… I don't know…growing I think that's the word..aye! (Kathleen).

Another participant, Kara from the wider group said:

> you can feel it…this allows you to be a person in your own right..you get your name back. I've never really had a close friendship with anybody..it's (learning) brought me confidence.

Finally, Merton (1968) writing on the subject of learner disaffection and deviant behaviour writes: 'when the institutional system is regarded as the barrier to the satisfaction of legitimised goals, the stage is set for rebellion' (pp.210-211). There was I found, complete congruence in the goals of all participants and those of their teachers. Much of the histories recounted to me by participants were echoed in what their teachers said. Not only did they know their learners at a deep personal level but like them, they wanted learning to lead to change, to transform their lives. This meant that learners and teachers worked together to achieve this precious and much sought-after goal.

This consistency of what was valued in learning, the reciprocal understandings between learners and teachers radically affected the classroom context making it a space where learners could practise their different and often contradictory identities, and make new selves. In those spaces, learners could be continually dialogical. They continually interacted with others through dialogue, through unspoken connections. They were free to explore and to be. Their changed experiences, perceptions and management of their personal and professional lives could be enacted, articulated and monitored within their learning settings. Not only did their teachers encourage and support these changes to presentations of self, but they anticipated them.

HOME AT LAST

Three main considerations I believe, emerge from this small scale study. My view is firstly, that we cannot view the curriculum in isolation and certainly formal learning is not what is most valued by learners. Cognitive activity only becomes meaningful for learners within a much broader context of learning which acknowledges who learners are, have been and aspire to be; and addresses their strong and enduring desire for self-making, self-understandings and the importance for them to practice aspects of who they are, who they are becoming and who they can be within their learning environment. Learning is first and foremost both a deeply personal journey and a social act to which every individual brings identities shaped by life experiences and visions of a future. Classroom strategies which take account of these wider considerations and the shaping of a learning context where learners are evolving on a range of fronts and are free to act as both resource and catalyst, will ensure a quality of engagement which brings about deeper transactions; will profoundly affect individuals and transform their lives and will most assuredly result in meaningful learning.

Secondly, we can never underestimate the importance of dialogue as a feature of learning. This study while it may not do enough justice to its importance, shows dialogue to be a means of interacting and sharing, of bonding and exploring; as a means of reflection leading to changed ways of engaging with others, of living lives, of reconciling with the past, of being able to plan better futures and futures which are more akin to who we are. Dialogue and different uses of language, led and framed by teachers and equally by learners with learners both within whole class and small group learning, are not only a means of brining about transformation and good learning but they area tangible indicator of a change process underway. They furthermore represent changes taking place in learners' lives outside the classroom.

Thirdly, learner relationships have emerged from this study as a key issue in the learning process. Small learning groups, where bonds and emotion are strong, where learning activities are generated, discussed and evaluated within an environment of security and intimacy, are a significant lever for deep individual change and transformation.

My claim to any significance which could be attached to this research is the extent to which it resonates, both with a number of other outcomes from research and what I perceive to be current academic interests.

Marková (1995) refers in her introduction, to a preoccupation by the research community in communication and dialogue; the field she writes is 'growing and subdividing'. There is an increasing number of studies on identity (Shakespeare 1996; Lamoureux 2006;, Diamond 2000; Butler 2006; Gallacher 2002, 2006). Lastly, it would appear (Josselson & Lieblich 1995;, McKee & Wilson 2002;, Traue & Pennebaker 1993;, Conway & Pleydell-Pearce 2000) that biography as a research approach, as well as a means of making identity and therefore significant for learning is an area of major interest.

I believe that the key contribution of my research is to underline the significance of the learning experience in the lives of individuals and how they see themselves. This may be both positive and negative and it could be argued, impact enduringly and pervasively on their lives. I am convinced through this research as well as my own long experience in education, that a positive learning experience has the potential to give people control and mastery over their lives and futures. It gives them a new voice which has currency, authenticity and authority. I believe finally, that this study opens the door to further exploration into what factors in the learning context act as a trigger for permanent change and in the end, for hope and for optimism.

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