



CRANFIELD UNIVERSITY
School of Management

PhD Thesis
Academic Year 1996-1997

A A French

**THE EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE UNDERGRADUATES:
DEGREES OF TRANSFORMATION**

Supervisor: Professor Colin Fletcher

April 1997



To Kristina, Gervase and Eccles.

ABSTRACT

Following discussions with staff (7), successive and progressive individual interviews were held throughout their course with a small group of undergraduates (8) taking a combined studies degree in a college of higher education. Data were not confined to the course but took a broad view, including their formal and informal lives and the interplay between them. What the informants faced and how they changed are all clearly illustrated.

The students' experiences are described and analysed using a concept of transformation as achievement and process. This concept is compared with other theories of transformation in the educational literature. It is argued that the students faced three phases of exposure: social exposure, the need to be accepted in a new setting; academic exposure, having to take seriously the formal judgements of tutors and sustain the will to study; and the 'final' phase of personal exposure, self-awareness and letting go of dependence. Commitment, routine and support were central to success.

Although the concept of education which informs it must reflect the values of the writer, the argument is firmly grounded in the data. To obtain an authentic portrayal, the critical incident technique was deployed in an extended way, through a form of questioning, which, it is suggested, could itself have a part to play in the tutorial role.

The study contributes to a fuller understanding of students' college careers by offering an holistic perspective and filling a gap in higher education research. It was based on data from a few informants in a small distinctive college at a particular time, but its possible wider relevance for theory and practice are discussed.

CONTENTS

PART ONE: CONTEXT, METHOD AND PROCESS

CHAPTER 1	BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW	page	3
2	CHOICE OF APPROACH, METHOD AND TECHNIQUE		17
3	THE RESEARCH PROCESS		36

PART TWO: THE STUDENTS' STORIES

CHAPTER 4	INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE HISTORIES		59
5	THE FIRST YEAR INTERVIEWS		67
6	FEELING UNSURE AND EXPOSED		86
7	THE SECOND YEAR INTERVIEWS: 1		93
8	THE TENSIONS OF ACADEMIC EXPOSURE		113
9	THE SECOND YEAR INTERVIEWS: 2		123
10	ROUTINES AND REALISATIONS		145
11	THE FINAL YEAR INTERVIEWS		156
12	DEGREES OF TRANSFORMATION		182

PART THREE: CRITIQUE AND DISCUSSION OF IMPLICATIONS

CHAPTER 13	THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION		199
14	THE EVIDENCE AND THE METHOD		216
15	THEORY AND PRACTICE		231
	REFERENCES		242

Note: Pseudonyms have been used for individuals, but not for the college, which is easily identified in the background detail given on pages 7-10.

TABLES

Table 3.1	Record of Fieldwork	36
Table 12.1	Degrees of Change	193
Table 12.2	Academic Value-Added	193
Table 12.3	Change, Value-Added and Totals	194
Table 13.1	Transformation	203
Table 13.2	Routines and their Consequences	206
Table 13.3	Contexts of Transformation	214
Table 14.1	Self-validating Interview Prompts	229

ACRONYMS

A Level	General Certificate of Education Advanced Level
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BACS	Bachelor of Arts in Combined Studies
BCE	Bedford College of Education
BCHE	Bedford College of Higher Education
BEd	Bachelor of Education
BTEC	Business and Technician Education Council
CIHE	Council for Industry and Higher Education
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards
DfE	Department for Education
FE	Further Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	Higher Education
INSET	Inservice Education and Training (of teachers)
LEA	Local Education Authority
MA	Master of Arts
O Level	General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level
PCFC	Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
RAP	Radio Assisted Practice
R and R	Romanticism and Realism

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Bedford College of Higher Education for financial and other practical help and to my colleagues there for their interest and moral support. Thanks also to Cranfield, in particular for arranging continuity of supervision. I greatly appreciated Colin Fletcher's cheerful encouragement, patient listening and cogent comments. Above all, I am indebted to the students who gave so generously of their time and allowed me to share their experiences.

I have also observed that a word cast in by the by hath done more execution in a sermon than all that was spoken besides: sometimes also when I have thought I did no good, then I did most of all; and at other times when I thought I should catch them, I have fished for nothing.

John Bunyan 'Grace Abounding'

PART ONE

CONTEXT, METHOD AND PROCESS

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

This study gives an account of students' experiences during their time as undergraduates and shows how they changed. It does not confine itself to their studies nor to the less formal aspects of their lives within the college itself, but ranges across into their personal concerns and worlds; their feelings about themselves, their families and friendships, their part-time work and where they live. Such an holistic picture is, to my knowledge, unique in higher education.

Data show how the seemingly separate parts of these students' lives interrelated and affected how they progressed towards their degrees and towards a better understanding of themselves. A case is made for a wider view of the educational process. It is a case based on empirical evidence, but that evidence has to be seen in context. Fieldwork was carried out during a particular period in time, 1989 to 1993, when qualitative data were gathered from a small number of informants in a small distinctive college by a sole insider-researcher, who had been a tutor there for more than twenty years. The fieldwork, analyses and arguments are rooted in that background and have related strengths and weaknesses.

This chapter describes the contexts in which the work was carried out, shows how the research arose and the concerns it explored, and gives an overview of the major findings. It begins with some remarks on the period when the fieldwork was done and background information is given about the college setting. Since research never occurs in a vacuum, the purposes of the inquiry are given in the context of the researcher's biography and interests. This is especially important here because of the individual interpretive style of the work. In the final section of the chapter, the main outcomes of the inquiry are given in outline.

A Time of Upheaval and Uncertain Expansion

Although Bedford College of Higher Education, in common with other higher education institutions, was undergoing a radical upheaval during the time of the fieldwork, the students' stories which are the heart of the thesis can give the impression of an enclosed, cosy world and make it easy to forget that this was a time of upheaval when:

societal norms were in a state of flux;

the movement to mass higher education had accelerated against a backcloth of uncertainty in funding and, beyond utility and viability, purpose;

pressures on the public purse were being felt by institutions and by individual students;

institutions were subject to unusually intense changes.

The second half of the twentieth century has been an age of uncertainty. From an American perspective Fowler refers to the "ferment regarding our cultural images of the good man/good woman". (Fowler 1984 p4) Longevity and material expectations and unprecedented levels of physical, social and economic mobility have replaced what consensus there was over normative images with relativism and pluralism. Given the close connection between education, values, politics and economics, such a ferment was bound to have an effect on what it was thought should be provided in colleges.

Two examples from the centre of the Establishment reflect the ferment in the UK. In a BBC interview broadcast in 1994, the Prince of Wales questioned the title of Defender of the Faith, by which every British monarch since Henry VIII had been addressed. As king, Charles would prefer to be called Defender of Faith, the better to acknowledge alternative belief systems. Also in 1994, a Church of England clergyman was deprived of his living for refusing to retract his view that God was a human projection, not a Being but a name for the sum of his own ideals and values in life. (Freeman 1993 p25)

The second half of the century has seen a ferment in values, and the years since 1989, when this study began, have been a time of major upheaval. The collapse of the Berlin Wall marked the end of an antagonism that had petrified the world for more than forty years and was then replaced by less controlled threats: the Gulf War, conflict in Africa, in the Balkans, in the former Soviet Empire, and a spreading fear of anarchic terrorism. Old certainties gave way to a search for new anchors.

In the UK there had been continuity in government since 1979, but it was a government of radical change with a faith in the free market that brought new uncertainties. By 1989 they had reached the most stable strata of society as 'negative equity' shook the idea of a home being a castle and the concept of 'multiple careers' took the place of a job for life. Such cultural and economic upheavals had to be felt in education, which has long served both as a scapegoat for the nation's ills as well as its potential saviour.

Consensus over the purposes of higher education is hard to find, but there was sufficient belief in it for there to be wide agreement that it was a good thing, which as many young people as possible should enjoy individually and to the economic benefit of all. In the USA universal access to higher education had been vigorously pursued since the fifties. The UK was following that lead. In the introduction to 'Higher Education into the 1990s', Sir Christopher Ball wrote:

The fundamental challenge facing UK higher education since the middle of the twentieth century has been how to adapt an elite system to provide a popular model; when the history of higher education in the present century comes to be written, I believe that the painful transformation to a popular system will be the key theme. (Ball and Eggins 1989 p1)

From 1980 to 1990 there was a 47% increase in first year full-time students and the proportion of young people entering higher education rose from 12.6% to over 19%. (DfE 1992) The government target to expand this to 30% by the late 1990s was reached by 1994. A diversity of institutions were offering HE to an increasingly diverse population of undergraduates which included more mature students and greater numbers with non-traditional entry qualifications. It was thought that six in ten eighteen year-olds could expect to enter university or college sooner or later, with many studying in mid careers on part-time courses. (Smithers and Robinson 1995)

With rapid expansion came a growing realisation of the limits of public funding. A freeze on expansion in 1995 was followed in 1996 by cuts in funding to institutions and even signs of a decline in the numbers of applicants as it became clearer that students and their families would be expected to shoulder a larger proportion of the financial burdens for returns that were by no means guaranteed. At the turn of the decade Williams predicted that graduate unemployment would cease to be a problem by 1995. (Ball and Eggins 1989 p122) It was an over-optimistic prediction. Although graduate employment prospects were improving by 1996, thousands still faced stiff competition for jobs. (The Times July 11 1996) Where Williams was right was in saying that pressure on the public purse would constrain the system of grants to students. The value of grants declined, making loans and part-time work more commonplace, and talk of a graduate tax respectable. At the time of writing the Committee of Vice-chancellors were exploring entrance fees and student contributions to the costs of tuition. It is as well to remember that the fieldwork was conducted at a time when those pressures were beginning to build up.

With the pressure on support for growing numbers, there were calls for providers to demonstrate that they were giving value for money. By 1989 the term 'performance indicators' was established in educational vocabulary. Finding satisfactory performance indicators is, however, not an easy task. Staff-student ratios and costs per student per programme are not judgements of quality, neither are research costings and output. (Cave et al 1988, Yorke 1991) Completion rates and grades are blunt instruments, given differences in intake. The idea of 'value-added' was embraced. Measuring gains accrued during college rather than output achievements, was attractive, given the different levels of qualification among intakes, but the rising variation in entrants and the difficulty in specifying what it is that students actually gain from being at college, made it less than straightforward.

Quality is a slippery word. We use it somewhat indiscriminately to refer to the quality of the student's educational experience, to the quality of the student's ability and attainment (at entry to or exit from higher education), and to the 'value added' during the process of higher education.

(Ball and Eggins 1989 pp3/4)

Ball prefers to think of quality in terms of fitness for purpose but that is equally slippery a notion. This study contributes to an appreciation of some of the problems.

Debate about higher education does not have the high media profile given to schools, but its purposes are nonetheless contentious. Current received wisdom is that colleges and universities must be clear about what they are trying to achieve in students so that performance can be measured against objectives. And, whatever it is that universities and colleges are offering, it should be useful; to the economy, to the State, to employers and students, in sum to the customers. 'Capability' and 'competences' are key words; general transferable skills and vocational skills, over which academic outcomes should not take precedence. Humanities are "for the Working World." (CIHE 1990) Against this trend, Barnett argues that HE is being undermined philosophically and sociologically; philosophically because new utility-driven objectives have no epistemological foundations and sociologically because pretensions to independence from the State have been lost. (Barnett 1990 p110)

Public sector higher education institutions have become independent corporate bodies, freed from local education authority control, but the price of freedom is having to face the considerable financial disciplines imposed by

government targets and levels of support. They are in the market place, but a publicly constrained market place. Barnett contrasts collegial self-reflection with evidence of increased line management as "faculty entrepreneurs" replace the "community of scholars". He adds that "the governance of academic institutions is liable to be reduced to mere technique under the control of managers with an eye on the bottom line." (ibid pp97/110) The "bottom line" is the balance sheet. It would be easy to dismiss Barnett as having too rosy a view of communities of scholars in any age, but higher education staff would now relate easily to his words.

The next section is an account of the case study college and of the changes that have taken place there.

The College and the Course

After the 1988 Education Reform Act, polytechnics and colleges of higher education left the control of local education authorities. Bedford did not qualify because much the greater part of its provision was in further and not higher education. 'Bedford College of Higher Education' was a misnomer. (Smart 1994) Bedford was, in fact, classified as a college of further education. Its independence had to await the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, which released FE colleges from LEA control.

The final chapter in Smart's (1994) history of higher education in Bedford is called, 'Years of Uncertainty'. Those years were from 1976, when Bedford College of HE was formed, until 1994, when its HE became part of De Montfort University. In 1994 the college was split. Its further education became a newly launched Bedford College, and its HE, ie the Lansdowne and Polhill sites, became De Montfort University, Bedford. De Montfort University was formerly Leicester Polytechnic. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 had given polytechnics the right to apply for and, if successful, to adopt the title 'university'.

The Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), by whose authority degrees had been awarded in non-university institutions, had progressively granted more autonomy in validation to its members. In 1992 CNAA ceased its work. During the time of this study some colleges became polytechnics and then universities, a few became universities, most merged or formed closer links with universities. Bedford looked to De Montfort University to validate its degrees before it became part of that institution.

Bedford is a small county town, which was home to two distinguished teacher training colleges. One opened in 1882 as a pioneer in the Froebelian training of teachers of young children and later became Bedford College of Education (BCE). Predominantly female, BCE recruited nationally and attracted local mature students. In 1969, BCE moved to a new purpose-built site (Polhill). The other teacher training college in the town was also distinctive. Bedford College of Physical Education (Lansdowne), from its own pioneering origins in 1903, built up an enviable reputation in the training of specialist women physical education teachers. There were 1,000 teacher trainees in Bedford in the 1960s, a figure which halved inside ten years. The formation of Bedford College of Higher Education (BCHE) in 1976 was a result of the national drop in teacher training numbers, which closed many colleges. In Bedford the two colleges of education merged with the FE college, which, with ten times as many students as they had, ensured the survival of teacher training in the town.

The name 'Bedford College of Higher Education' reflected a vision of a comprehensive institute offering a range of progressive opportunities to a high standard. Cross-college structures were set up to promote this, but few inroads were made across cultures. Lansdowne and Polhill kept much of their former identities and the further education site stayed largely as it was before, but now housing the administration of a 'college of higher education'.

Financial problems forced change. Higher education within the college was being subsidised by further education and, classified as a further education college, BCHE could not leave the LEA to qualify for capital funding from the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) under the 1988 Act. It was in an "anomalous position, straddled awkwardly between LEA and PCFC." (Smart 1994 p213) Higher education was put into a single faculty with the task of achieving financial viability as a prelude to its merger with another institution. By 1989, when the fieldwork for this thesis began, the search for a new partner had begun. When the fieldwork was completed in 1993, success in recruiting and raising fee income had been such that the Faculty of Higher Education was out of deficit.

The HE student population rose to just over 1,000 in 1989 (740 BEd students, 60 taking the primary and secondary PGCEs, 150 the Combined Studies and 110 the Sports Studies degrees). The college population had doubled since 1979, and had returned to its size ten years before that, but it was still very much a teacher training institution - only just over 20%

its students were taking non-teaching degrees. All this was to change rapidly in the next five years, when kaleidoscopic shifts of policy coupled with radically different degree structures and a doubling of student numbers made for a period of uncertainty and challenge which more than equalled any of those faced by the colleges and their staff in the often turbulent preceding years. (Smart 1994 p208)

By 1994 there were 2,500 students at Polhill and Lansdowne, which, as the Faculty of Higher Education, became part of De Montfort University. The years between 1989 and 1994 at Bedford saw a rapid increase in student numbers, a shift in the balance of provision away from teacher training, strained resources and, for a long period, worries about an uncertain future. In December 1990 Bedfordshire County Council voted narrowly for a merger of HE with Luton College, a move opposed by a majority of staff and students, who favoured Leicester Polytechnic, now De Montfort University. Negotiations were overtaken by the 1992 Act, which gave the college independence from the LEA and the control of the County Council. The new governors reconsidered and decided that BCHE should not be split up but should be an independent mixed-economy FE/HE college. This was met with dismay and opposition from HE. Students demonstrated and were influential in reversing that decision. In 1994, the year after fieldwork for this study ended, higher education at Bedford, ie the Polhill and Lansdowne sites, became part of De Montfort University.

The group of students in this inquiry were all full-time and taking the BA Combined Studies (BACS), which had originally been validated by CNAAB in 1979. In common with other teacher training institutions, whose numbers had dropped dramatically in the 1970s, Bedford had first established a CNAAB BEd and then diversified provision into greatly increased in-service teacher training and alternative degrees. These degrees were attractive to local mature students and, nationally, to those students who specifically looked for a small college or whose A Level results would not qualify them for a university or polytechnic place. By 1989, when this study began, there were 150 students taking the BA Combined Studies course, including a strong presence of matures. Each student's programme consisted of three subjects, two taken for three years and one for two years. Two year subjects were chosen from: Computer Studies, Drama, Ecological Studies and Romanticism and Realism. The choice of three year subjects was from: Ecological Studies, English, French, History, Human Geography, Outdoor Recreation Studies and Sociology. One three year subject would be the Major and involve the writing of a Special Study in the final year. The students in this

inquiry were part of the last entry. In 1990 the BA Combined Studies and the BA Sports Studies Degrees were packaged together in a modular BA/BSc offering a wide range of choice across nine 'pathways'.

In summary:

Bedford College of Higher Education was unusual. It was, in effect, a small higher education college administered through an FE institution within a small town.

Fieldwork took place during a period of rapid and uncertain change which involved the transition from Local Authority College to a nationally funded and accountable part of a new university;

Polhill had been a largely female primary college of education with a local mature entry as well as an 18+ entry. Lansdowne had been a women's PE college and was now a centre for Sports and Leisure Studies;

The BA Combined Studies offered HE to students with comparatively modest qualifications. It was a testing ground for the move to a mass system of higher education.

The Concerns and Purposes of an Insider-Researcher

Some background has been given on the period when this study was carried out and the college where fieldwork took place. In this section an account is given of the researcher's history and of the aims of the inquiry.

The research was carried out by myself as an insider, a 'practitioner researcher' (Schon 1983). When fieldwork began, I had been a full-time member of staff for over twenty years. By the time it finished I had retired and was working as a part-time lecturer. Because I was the sole researcher and, in an important sense, the research instrument, an insight into my background is needed to show the influences on my thinking and to bring into focus at an early stage any sources of value bias which will have affected the data collection and the analysis.

Having left a country-town grammar school in the post war years, my first job was as a gardener. In the sixth form I had taken an examination for the Civil Service, and was waiting to take up my first position. I became an Inland Revenue officer. It was to be a short career, interrupted by a period of National Service in the RAF and terminated when I decided to train for teaching. I went to a church 'training college for schoolmasters' in the 1950s and taught in schools for eleven years, six of

them as headteacher of a rural primary school. Whilst there, I was seconded for a year to take a Diploma in Primary Education at Cambridge. I continued to study part-time to take the Diploma and the MA in Philosophy of Education at London, for which I wrote a dissertation on Froebelian ideas. At London I was influenced by the thinking of R S Peters and his work on the concept of education, an influence which is probably evident in the view of the educational process that I hold.

In 1968 I joined the staff of BCE (Polhill), where I became increasingly involved in the in-service education and training of teachers and developed an interest in theory and professional education and how they related to practice. Membership of the CNAA In-Service Committee gave me the opportunity to visit other institutions, meet lecturing staff and their teacher-students, and to discuss courses. Despite the lengthy degree proposal documents with their carefully stated objectives, the nature and benefits of theory in education remained unclear to me. What was clear was that the validation and evaluation of courses was far from being an exact science. Scepticism about statements of aims and outcomes and a certain wariness of any pretensions to precision have influenced this present study.

In 1986 I was granted a year's secondment in which my interests in evaluation, educational theory and the working lives of teachers coalesced in an inquiry for an MPhil by practitioner research using the critical incident technique. The research style and technique have been developed in this study. The MPhil strongly suggested that concerns about teaching skills and educational theory, then the stuff of in-service courses, played what was for a tutor a disappointingly small part in the working lives of teachers. Their day-to-day worries revolved more around their relationships with other teachers and with their headteachers in particular. (French 1988) Parallels with the present inquiry are again apparent.

When I returned to college, my role changed. I became involved with quality assurance and acted as the link with CNAA in the mutual arrangement of validations. I continued to experiment with critical incident as a way of gathering data for evaluations, basing the work in teacher education. Data gathered by using the technique offered the advantages of realism, of being embedded in the lives of the students. (French 1992) Ruddock (1981) echoed some of my concerns when he described the web of realities, values and interests in which evaluations were located and the many levels at which learning occurred. In Ruddock's view, if a simple purpose was

stated for an evaluation, further thought as to whether it was worthwhile was warranted. He added:

evaluation is generally initiated in the interests of the 'system' and those who control it, and we might think of the possibility of evaluation from the view of those designated as subjects.

(Ruddock 1981 p36)

That thought has influenced this inquiry. On CNA A validation visits there were mandatory conversations with students and, in their evaluations, tutors were obliged to show that they had obtained student feedback, but there was a sense of unease about the superficiality of some of the procedures. A CNA A conference was held to discuss what methods to use to gather data about the experience of students, and how to use the data as part of quality assurance. (CNA A 1992) The first stated purpose of gathering feedback was to help teaching staff "understand the students' learning experience." It seemed to me, however, that too often the agenda was that of the providers with students being seen as learners, customers, users of facilities, those who should be empowered or as co-course planners. They were not seen as people with their own preoccupations. Perhaps because of primary school teaching experience and certainly because of my MPhil study of the lives of teachers in their schools, I wanted to understand the students better. Rather than starting from the course perspective, I was becoming increasingly interested in their day-to-day lives and the part that their studies played in them. To consider a course as something apart from the rest of life seemed to favour tidiness over distortion. That was the key thought behind this study.

Students taking the BA Combined Studies were chosen as subjects because, unlike those in teacher education, they had no particular career in mind, which made them more challenging and interesting. Their experience would also be of more direct relevance to the rapid moves from an elite to a mass system of higher education. I was in a good position in relation to the BA. I knew the course but my teaching involvement had been minimal, limited to a small input in its early days. I was not a BA Combined Studies tutor during the fieldwork and was not known as such to the student informants. Nonetheless I started with the benefits of insider knowledge and contacts.

Broad and Fletcher argue that practitioner research can take a variety of forms: inquiries arise from questions practitioners pose themselves: as people with values, professionals with responsibilities, post-holders with problems or 'doers' with processes. (Broad and Fletcher

1993 p165) It may be helpful in summarising my own background and values to say that I began this study:

as a former primary teacher with an interest in education;

as a teacher trainer with a sceptical stance towards theory in relation to practice;

as a higher education tutor with an interest in the preoccupations and development of students;

as an evaluator/researcher with an interest in obtaining rich subjective data.

In line with the above, I sought an account of the students' worlds from their points of view to enhance my understanding of their concerns and experiences. The purposes of the research were as follows:

- 1 To explore the experiences of a group of BA Combined Studies students as they come to college, go through the course, and then as they complete it. To gain a clearer picture of what it is like from their point of view.
- 2 To develop a style of ethnography involving the generation of organizing ideas from a sequence of interviews based on the critical incident technique.
- 3 To explore the potential contribution of a loosely elicited sequence of student stories as data for course evaluation.

In time the third purpose became less important except in terms of evaluation as portrayal (Stake 1972, Parlett and Hamilton 1972) in its widest sense. The second purpose, the development of the critical incident technique, remained central, but that purpose was a means to what remained as the main end, the exploration of the experiences of a group of HE students.

The Main Findings

Earwaker (1992) argues that the HE student experience has changed dramatically within a short space of time. The anonymity of an open competitive system in which there is a very much greater diversity of higher education institutions and students has replaced any idea of a unifying academic community. He argues that what is a more diverse system exposes divisions and is divisive and that HE students now have very different experiences. The context, the composition of the student body, the size and range of institutions and their

purposes have all changed. Even within one institution, being a student can come to mean different things. At the micro level, this study illustrates how that is so even in a comparatively small college among students taking the same course.

It can be seen in these data that taking a course can have different levels of significance in individual students' lives and have different meanings for them. It can be the most important thing a student has ever done or it can be marginal. For most of them, it is probably somewhere in between. During the time that the student informants were taking the course, they had different experiences. They were faced with their own problems, had different levels of support and they changed to different degrees. They may have been taking the same course, but what they were individually facing, what they were overcoming and what they were learning were the same only in the general terms of what emerged as a theory of transformation. Their stories showed the informants' individuality and how their personal lives interrelated with the demands of the course.

Life for these students was not the idyllic interlude it is sometimes seen as. It had its tensions and anxieties. A romantic image of the poor scholar or the more hard-headed realisation that, for many students, money is tight and getting tighter is a reminder of one obvious source of worry.

The student experience is spoken of less in terms of fun and freedom, and more in terms of anxiety and constraint. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the economics of student life; students are once again becoming very poor. (Earwaker 1992 p40)

Fun and freedom were present in the stories of the students in this study, but anxiety and tension were the more striking features. The extent of their insecurity and anxiety came as a surprise to the researcher. It may have been that their insecurity reflected the societal uncertainties and institutional upheavals referred to in previous sections, but those links were not consciously made by them. Neither was their anxiety primarily to do with the economics of student life, with money. Their worries were about being accepted by others, finding a way to balance priorities in coping with the course, and coming to recognise and accept themselves. Put simply, these students' tasks were to find their feet by finding friends, to find a way to manage the demands of study and assessment within the context of their priorities and circumstances, and to find a platform into the wider world by finding themselves. Although the stories were individual, common patterns could be seen and a process

of transformation could be discerned in them. Crucial to this process were support, determination, and realism. Portraying these students' insecurities and struggles, finding common patterns and showing where a process of transformation could be seen is the core of the thesis. Given the small number of subjects and the particular setting, claims for wider relevance are tentative.

It is argued that a key concept in understanding the processes of personal change and transformation is the notion of phases of exposure, an idea which provides a focus for the kind of challenges each of these students had to try to overcome. There was, first, the challenge of social exposure; the need to find acceptance and support in a new setting, facing informal assessments by others. Second in time and perhaps in importance was the challenge of academic exposure; having to find a way to manage the requirements of study and formal assessment. Third was the challenge of personal exposure; exposure of self to one's own critical and informed judgement, a time for turning the lens inwards. This challenge was self-appraisal and self-acceptance, seen from a wider cognitive perspective on the world and one's place in it. Transformation was rooted in personal exposure.

The concept of transformation brings together knowledge, emotion and action and incorporates educational values in a way that other concepts of HE do not. The theory of transformation as it emerged in this study is compared with the work of other transformation theorists and the differences are discussed. It is a concept not usually associated with higher education.

This study is uniquely grounded in the experiences of a group of undergraduates as they reported them for their significance to them. It includes their experiences of life beyond the course and college, addressing what is a neglected area in educational research. It displays the informants' tensions, sets out their routines and shows the consequences of them. Turning points and influential contingencies in their careers are illustrated.

Seeing undergraduate education as transformation has implications for the idea of 'value-added' and is tested against it. It is also argued that a transformation perspective has relevance for how tutors perceive their role and their practice.

If the transformation perspective that is developed in this thesis is adopted, it must prompt thought about aims, ethos, and the relationship between tutoring and supporting individual students. This inquiry set out to develop the critical incident technique, an important aspect of which was generating questions to draw out the

student informants' concerns. Such questions were shown to provide rich data and they could have a place within tutorial practice, being potentially helpful to both tutors and students. Research into informal questioning by tutors, including questioning that goes beyond the curriculum, is suggested.

Another area for further work is the possibility that different categories of students may face an increased likelihood of having to cope with particular risks. For example, young male students could be more likely to suffer the tensions of maintaining peer credibility while fulfilling academic requirements and mature female students be more likely to create their own tensions by expecting too much of themselves in terms of marks and workload. To research that possibility would involve a focused study on a much larger scale. An immediate step would be to supplement course evaluation data with interviews held with subgroups across courses.

The rationale for the form that this inquiry took, the thinking behind the choice of a small-scale study using qualitative methodology with successive individual interviews based on critical incident style questioning, is given in the next chapter. Given the centrality of critical incident, the chapter has a full discussion of that technique.

CHAPTER TWO

CHOICE OF APPROACH, METHOD AND TECHNIQUE

Chapter One set the inquiry in context; in its time and place, and as it arose from the personal history and interests of the researcher. That this was felt to be necessary shows a commitment to embedded inquiry, a belief that the advantages of positivistic objectivity, of scientific distancing, measurement and testing may be bought at too high a price or applied too early in the social world, because people, including the researchers themselves, generate meaning and significance. People are not just subject to causal laws; they act on their understandings and purposes and they do so in their own particular situations. Once a high degree of confident knowledge and a justified precision in formulating categories and questions have been reached, precoded, even researcher-proofed, instruments of measurement, giving ease of numerical analysis, may be appropriate, but that was not the case here. The focus had to be on the students, on their understandings, on what was significant to them in their circumstances. Increasingly sceptical of official perspectives on being a student and taking a course, I felt it important to see how the course related to them and to their lives. I wanted to understand more, to try to find my way about, possibly to find reasonable questions to ask. The choice in terms of fitness for purpose was a qualitative approach.

Qualitative Methodology: Concerns and Problems

And yet I find this method more honourable than the quantitative method. The honour comes from the integrity of being able to admit that much is still a mystery. (Fletcher 1974 p104)

Such an admission was reflected in my uneasiness about too ready an acceptance of precision in education and my commitment to embedded inquiry, to trying to understand in context from the perspectives of the subjects of the research. Because qualitative research takes different forms and covers a range of stances - phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, for example - it can be difficult to locate a specific style. There is, however, some agreement that its concerns include an acceptance of the importance of context, of natural settings, of discovery, and of holism. (Sherman and Webb 1988) A major contention is that experience cannot be understood if it is fragmented or out of context, for example in situations artificially contrived for testing preconceived ideas.

Qualitative research, then, has the aim of understanding experience as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it.

(Sherman and Webb 1988 p7)

One of the roots of qualitative research is in anthropology, when an outsider spent time living with a remote and clearly bounded tribe in an effort to describe and analyse their society. This was not without problems, given the difficulty any outsider would have in gaining authentic insider understanding, and the charges researchers faced that they took a 'colonial' attitude to 'savages'. Both these problems stem from the fact that what observers see is bound to be affected by the perceptions and concepts they bring to a situation.

When anthropology 'came home' and its practitioners began to research into what was on their own doorsteps, the perceptual gaps between researcher and subjects narrowed. Arguably, that narrowing can make gaps easier to overlook. However that may be, the focus of much of the work shifted to life in situations that were less easily circumscribed than tribes, to life in modern towns and cities for example, and new difficulties were added, among them the methodological concerns of reconciling participant observation, the main source of data, and holism to situations of greater complexity. (Burgess 1984 pp14/16) 'At home', studies of whole societies had to give way to inquiries centred on parts of society, on particular groups, locations or themes; eg drug users, prisons, pain management. Selective studies, particularly small-scale in-depth inquiries, highlighted questions about their generalisability. What was their relevance to understanding similar people in other situations, different locations, or the wider society beyond the particular group or location studied?

The primary aim of this study was to explore the experiences of a group of BA students. The purpose was an increased understanding. It was a very different situation from that faced by an anthropologist living with a tribe, and, given that I was an insider, who had spent many years in college, it was different from that usually faced by a researcher trying to understand drug takers, life in a prison, in a hospital ward, or, for that matter, a classroom. All the problems outlined in the previous paragraph nonetheless applied. Questions could be raised about the validity of the data. Would I be getting a true picture of the students' experiences and perspectives? My experience as a student had been in a different era, in very different circumstances. Now there was a considerable age gap and I was a member of the staff, which meant that there was a power imbalance between me and the students. However much I might pride

myself on a having a democratic outlook and a non-threatening demeanour, how students saw me was another matter. My position would cast doubt on the full authenticity of the data.

A perennial problem is where, when and how to gather data. What would be the bases of a selective process? Students would not attend the same classes and would probably go their separate ways in the evenings, at weekends and during vacations. 'Holism' means the whole experience of being a student, informal as well as formal, off as well as on campus. Being a student brings freedom on a much greater scale than being at school: to leave that out of the reckoning could be to ignore an essential feature. Finally, if a valid account were to be gained of some students' experiences at Bedford, what relevance would that account have for understanding other students at Bedford and elsewhere?

Validity, reliability, selectivity and generalisability are especially intractable in small-scale qualitative studies and these issues are specifically discussed later. A detailed description of the research process and full case studies in Part Two of the thesis present the evidence for the validity of the data and commentary chapters illustrate the concept-indicator links (Rose 1982 p42/3) that inform the overall account. In Part Three the possible wider relevance of that account is discussed. What the above issues have in common is a concern with the truth, and, at this stage, I shall set out a perspective on that concept before returning to the choice of method and technique.

Truth and Evidence

Rosen argues for a wider appreciation in management studies of social constructionist research, where the researcher's task is, "to describe and analyse the world from the perspective of those involved.." (Rosen 1991 p6) That task is, however, not as straightforward as it sounds. It may even be said to be impossible.

Writing about the problems that beset the ethnographic description of social worlds, Hammersley (1992) argues that the assumptions behind the approach can ensnare researchers in a contradiction. On the one hand, there is the relativity implicit in accepting the legitimacy of different world views, cultures and perspectives, different constructions of reality, and, on the other hand, there is the claim to the "ethnographic realism" of close observation, of knowing because one was there. Hammersley argues that the contradiction lies in taking a "naive" view of realism; a view that the aim of social research is to "reproduce" that which is independent of

the researcher. This is said to be impossible since "we are all part of reality". All we can do is "represent" reality", represent it from our point of view.

Thus, there can be multiple, non-contradictory and valid descriptions and explanations of the same phenomenon. Hammersley (1992 p51)

Any strict idea of inter-observer reliability, that different observers can be relied upon to give identical accounts of what they observe, has then to be abandoned in qualitative research, where mystery is accepted and observers' eyes cannot all be precoded. Reliability has to take on a more subtle meaning, as, for example, in the clarity of concept-indicator links mentioned above. To overcome the contradiction between subjectivism on the one hand and "naive realism", the search for the unerring reproduction of what is 'out there', on the other, Hammersley advances the notion of "subtle realism", which accepts that research investigates phenomena independent of the researcher, but also accepts that knowledge is a human construction and that direct access to those phenomena is impossible.

Perhaps most important of all, subtle realism is distinct from both naive realism and relativism in its rejection of the notion that knowledge must be defined as beliefs whose validity is known with certainty. Hammersley (1992 p52)

The question is, how then can validity be established? How can we judge that we have found what we set out to find, and that what we have found is the truth?

Hammersley's stand against naive realism in qualitative research brings with it a recognition of the dangers of "being led astray" by our cultural assumptions and of the "need to be more vigilant" about evidence. There is, however, more than a hint of a straw man in Hammersley's argument. The straw man stems from his being too reliant on the correspondence theory of truth and comparative neglect of the fact that the nature of evidence differs according to what is being claimed. There are other theories of truth.

Having grounds for truth claims on the basis of their correspondence with what is actually there, with what is visibly taking place or being physically said, must, of course, be fundamental to communication. Sense data are the basic furniture of the world, an ontological stratum upon which knowledge is based. The presence of rain, of the cat on the mat, the fact that Dan is in a history class, or that Mark said he came to college to enjoy it (whether he meant it or not); in such examples, truth is

established by the corresponding state of affairs. Sense data are the external test. Under normal conditions, eg no bad light or hardness of hearing, there is little room for argument. But then, what can be established by correspondence alone is of little interest. For example, what people are feeling and thinking are mental states of affairs, which are accessible only to them, making correspondence inapplicable as a public test. A case has to be made in giving interpretations of other people's behaviour, including their verbal behaviour, and, while elements of the case are made up of what has been seen or heard, there is no public sense datum corresponding to the case itself.

The coherence theory of truth, like the correspondence theory, operates ontologically and epistemologically, giving a perspective on what is actually there and what can be known. Ontologically, the coherence theory finds its home in metaphysics, with the idea that everything is interconnected in the Absolute. Only God has the overall view, the truth; researchers have but partial glimpses. When we observe something, what we cannot see, in particular everything to which what we are observing stands in relationship, is missing. When we state what we see, that statement is a tiny fraction of the whole. Ideas of the Absolute and total interconnectedness may sound unworldly, but they find echoes in chaos theory and in 'holism'. Research must be partial, but a warning against the dangers inherent in selectivity is apposite. In terms of grounds for truth claims, the coherence theory cannot, of course, insist on a demonstration of universal interconnectedness. It does, however, insist that what is claimed is interconnected in the sense of being logically consistent. An important part of the evidence needed to support a representation of events and utterances is not only that it corresponds to what is actually seen and heard, but that it hangs together, it is coherent. Whether that is so or not is a matter for public judgement.

A different form of grounds for truth is found in the third classical theory, pragmatism, associated with the USA, and, in particular, with John Dewey. The appeal of pragmatism was no surprise in the 'new world', where energy, fresh challenges, and a frontiersman mentality meant that the world was a set of problems. In those circumstances, what is true is what works. There are, of course, differences between speculative inquiry, the attempt to establish what is the case, and trying to solve a practical problem. A workable solution may stem from false ideas. The test for truth cannot just rest on results in practice, but it is always pertinent to ask: Does this theory work? Does it represent and reasonably account for what is going on?

In May 1994 a seminar at Cranfield by Professor Gioia of Penn State University, entitled 'Qualitative Rigour... Presenting Credible Qualitative Research', was billed as being targeted to a 'potentially sceptical audience'. In line with the argument in this study, Gioia stressed the interpretive in understanding what people qualitatively experience. To attain rigour, a researcher should, he said, "leave a trail of evidence leading to a plausible representation of informants' experience". Rigour in research is, however, generally associated not with plausibility, but with the truth. Typically, deceivers are said to be plausible, whereas researchers should be above reproach. Matters are not, of course, that clear-cut. 'Truth', in the toolbox of words (Wittgenstein 1958) we call language, is used to persuade as well as to state. To call a representation reliable and valid, an account true, is not to make a statement about it, it is to put forward a claim, to make a case. The validity of that claim is established, not by holding it up against the world as Hammersley's "naive realist", does, but by providing satisfactory answers to the following kinds of question:

Is the account faithful to the facts?

Is the interpretation coherent and consistent?

Does the interpretation/theory work by fitting the facts and by offering an enhanced understanding?

Is the case put forward persuasive?

The difference between researchers and deceivers lies not only in their honest intent but, crucially, as Gioia pointed out, in their leaving a trail of evidence. In the next section I discuss the major choice I made in gathering evidence; the decision to use successive interviews with a small group of students as the main means of data collection.

The Choice of Successive Individual Interviews

There was no problem in terms of access to the college. When the project began in 1989, I was a member of staff with an office/tutorial room at Polhill. That remained the case until the end of August 1992, when I retired from full-time work. The networks I had established and my then becoming a visiting lecturer ensured that I had continued ease of access to colleagues, documents and students. I was never aware of barriers or gatekeepers. The location for the research, to that extent, presented no difficulty. The subjects were to be BA students. Both where and from whom data should be gathered appeared to

be straightforward. The major decisions would be the method of data gathering and the selection of students.

Students were the focus of the inquiry, the main aims being to follow their experiences, to explore how they made sense of them and to get a purchase on what they found significant in their circumstances. Surveying everyone on the course, which at the time was just 150, studying different year groups over a year, following a whole cohort through the course; these were all possible and were not ruled out by the adoption of a qualitative methodology. Data could have been gathered from a larger number of students through open-ended questionnaires, group interviews, informal conversations and/or the keeping of diaries. More students could command more general credibility. On the other hand, there would be better chances of obtaining rich data on individual experiences and for checking data with individuals if I restricted the study to a limited number. Establishing trust would be key in overcoming any staff/student power imbalance. Getting to know the informants was central to my purposes and so I chose to restrict the number of students to single figures.

Qualitative research is normally based on observation, interviews and documents. I chose to rely on interviews, to the apparent relative neglect of observation and the study of documents, because I was an insider-researcher, because there were convincing practical and theoretical reasons for doing so, and because I already had some similar research experience on which to build. In terms of fitness for my purposes, successive individual interviews seemed to offer the most promising prospect.

When the study began, I had both administrative (quality assurance) and tutorial roles, the former having brought me into fairly regular official contact with the BA. That administrative role meant that I had a good knowledge of the course and of the documentation associated with it. Two decades of working in what was a small college, albeit primarily as a teacher trainer, also meant that I knew most of the BA staff. I did not have to get to know key people or read documents in order to get a purchase on the institution and the course. That is why I used the phrase "apparent relative neglect" of observation and documents. As a long-standing participant and "observer" in the college, I had a fund of knowledge that would necessarily feed into the research. In that sense, my practitioner research had multiple methods built in.

My background was, however, a problem, as well as an asset, the problem being that my experience was as a tutor in education and an administrator. To extend the

point Hammersley (1992) made about representation to experience, it cannot exist in vacuo. Experience has to be lived from some point of view, and my point of view could cloud my windscreen. It was students' experiences I needed to understand and, to do that, I would need to listen to them. There were practical reasons, too, why interviews were more appropriate than observation. My interest was in the whole experience of being a student, in their formal and informal lives, off as well as on campus. However few the students, they would be in different places for a large proportion of their time and I simply could not be with them in every situation, or even every sort of situation. Even on campus they would not have a lecture or seminar room in common, since they were taking combined studies. As the inquiry progressed, I did have occasion to visit some sessions in which one or other of 'my students' was taking part, and I met them informally both off and on site, but never by design. In any case, as a full-time tutor, I was not in a position to set aside the extended periods needed for participant observation even if I had thought it worthwhile to do so.

In studying how six teenagers adapted to the demands of life in a comprehensive, Stanley (1989 p175) 'lived with them' in school, but commented that the only "genuine ethnography" occurred when she stayed overnight with one pupil and her family. Half way into her data collection, "ethnography metamorphosed into something very like oral history". (ibid p171) I decided from the outset that it was better to ask students to tell me their experiences. Burgess (1984) raised the methodological concerns of reconciling participant observation, usually the main source of ethnographic data, and holism to situations of greater complexity. To counter such concerns I relied on reported experiences as the main source of data and used interviews as a form of vicarious observation.

Observation has to be selective and it seemed right to leave the selecting to the students. They could choose which experiences to report. A powerful theoretical reason why observer selection is suspect has to do with the nature of perception. Even when an observer has chosen times and places, certain features of what is observed will stand out rather than others. Perception is selective.

Even in a very small-scale setting we could not describe everything and any description we do produce is inevitably based on inferences.

(Hammersley and Atkinson 1983 p13)

It is not only that. Even in a very restricted setting we do not see everything as others present see it.

I commented above that being a staff member could "cloud my windscreen" and, earlier, that previous experience of a situation "narrowed perceptual gaps", but, arguably, at the possible cost of making the remaining gaps easier to overlook. What is seen in a situation is informed by the understandings and feelings that are brought to it. As I pointed out in discussing truth as correspondence, what people are feeling and what they are thinking are accessible only to them. The concepts that determine our experience are public in that they arise in shared forms of life, but, in another sense, they are private and so is the experience that they inform. This is the problem with 'shadowing exercises'. Being in a seminar with students does not amount to having the same experience and finding out about how the world looks from their viewpoints takes time. It is perhaps not surprising that Stanley's idea of getting to know a comprehensive class as a group by spending two years with them was, with hindsight, a "non-starter". The key was to get to "know a few of them as people." (Stanley 1989 p13)

My main aim was to explore the experiences of a group of students as they came to college and went through the course. Snapshots of groups of students from different years of the course would condense the process, but would not fit the purpose. It was important that the interviews should take place over time and, primarily for the theoretical reasons articulated above, that they should be with individuals. I held conversations as far as possible with the same individual students over a period of three/four years. This process was true to the purpose of the study and gave two significant benefits: the opportunity to check back on previously gathered data and, what was particularly helpful in a study of education, it offered me a window on any developments in the students' thoughts and attitudes. The choice of successive individual student interviews as the main source of data fitted the purpose of the research, it was true to the nature of perception, it was feasible and it fitted my situation. Countering problems inherent in observation by relying on reported experiences did not, however, escape the difficulty of selection, which was transferred to the means of eliciting reports, to the questions that would be put in the interviews. In this I had some experience to draw on.

Questions and Stories

An unusual variation I had tried in interviewing is the 'Self-Q Technique' (Bougon 1983). Bougon was interested in exploring the concept-structure of individuals.

A cause map of a person's concept-structure can be interpreted as a map of his or her motivation

structure, as it displays that person's ends, means, conflicts, and contexts for sensemaking.

An observer watching a person's activities without knowing their context, as displayed by that person's cause map, may well endow these activities with a meaning different from the one that person attaches to them. (Bougon 1983 p181)

To uncover personal meanings, Bougon devised the self-questioning technique, the Self-Q. He claimed it was a nondirective, nonreactive way of interviewing, which passed most of the steering and validating problems to the interviewees. It is a four stage process. During the first interviews, the researcher lists the specific questions the subjects pose themselves. At the second interview, each subject is asked to verify and to place in order of importance concepts extracted from these self-posed questions. They are set out on card, eg 'my prestige with my friends'. The third stage centres on a questionnaire designed to elicit the strength of motivating beliefs and concerns. Graphical displays of the "cause maps" are presented at final meetings and subjects asked whether they make sense to them in a global validity check with each individual.

I tried the first stage on teachers taking in-service degrees at two other colleges. Following Bougon's instructions, a chart was drawn to help the flow of questions when respondents faltered. The chart was not directive in specifics, but it was in the perspectives suggested. In the centre was the course with the self as 'I' and 'Me', subject and object, and others involved at college, work and home. Suggested perspectives were: self as seen by others and then looking at others and taking a look at oneself. The circle containing these vectors was set in the wider social context, the world outside. The idea was to point and say, "How about trying it this way?" (Bougon 1983 p184)

How does the course help me in my teaching? That was a question teacher students frequently chose to pose themselves, but more specific questions about subjects, strategies and skills were not as forthcoming. Some left question-posing, the Self-Q, all together to talk, for example, of having been in a rut and of the support the BEd group offered. One asked whether tutors realised they had families and jobs, another whether people at home and at work appreciated the demands of doing a degree part-time. One asked why he invested so much in it, professional interest or a long-standing wish for a cap and gown? The interviews raised concerns I might have missed, but I had reservations. Respondents found it hard and I was not comfortable. Getting questions

from them was difficult and they tended to go into long answers to those they did pose. I used only the first step of a four-stage technique. However, I did note the importance of the personal within the professional life and the idea of successive individual interviews with the continuous checking and refining of ideas.

During the Self-Q sessions, some teachers backed up what they said with accounts of experiences. Questioning the need for such an extensive workload, for example, one told me how a family holiday had suffered. I thought the story gave life and backing to the point he made.

There is sometimes a tendency to class as 'good' data interviews which are well sprinkled with stories. But is one justified in so thinking?.... I would argue that their value is in many cases dubious...although stories are full of detail of settings, reported speech, and so on, we cannot assume that they thereby provide valid data, either of what actually happened or of how the interviewee actually perceived things to have happened.

(Askham 1982 p571)

Twisting reality to put oneself in a good light, the use of exaggeration to be entertaining, are possibilities. Askham discusses stories as data in the context of a study of marriage using semi-structured interviews. Some stories, which were not specifically asked for, were given as examples on particular themes, or to give life to a description. Others, however, acted

as a way of continuing an answer, of avoiding losing face by saying that one cannot answer, and of deflecting the interviewer away from the difficult question.....The final circumstance in which stories were told was when they had only an indirect connexion with little or no bearing at all on the preceding question. Almost a third of the stories seemed to arise in this way, appearing to emerge from the interviewee's own train of thought.

(Askham 1982 p565)

This did not seem to be an indictment because it was the interviewees' trains of thought that I was interested in. Young (1989), for example, showed how patients used 'irrelevant' stories throughout the ritual of undressing and examination in the doctor's surgery in order to preserve their identities. An example given is of a patient talking about his war wound, which was totally unrelated to the ostensive point of the visit. In their stories patients reveal their anxieties and wishes. In this sense, the distortions of a diverting story-teller

may not be as great as those of researchers who preset the format for the answers they require.

In his discussion of stories as evidence, Askham notes that people generally tell stories about unusual and unexpected happenings and not about the mundane business of everyday life. Such stories can be informative about assumptions, but as sources of data on what happened or on how an interviewee pictures the world in general, they are, in his view, unhelpful. However, assumptions cannot be divorced from how someone pictures the world and stories can be helpful in revealing one's beliefs and feelings. Rather than accepting stories only as examples to back up more formal responses, it can be argued that stories provide an indirect but effective starting point for a more thorough exploration.

Backing for an indirect approach comes from Nias (1991), who set out to evaluate her PGCE course by following up the teachers in their schools and soon realised that her concerns were of little relevance to them. The main aim then became trying to capture a comprehensive picture of the subjective reality of primary teaching. She was guided by three principles: to make her questions sound natural, to seek concrete responses, and

Third, I approached sensitive areas, and especially ones likely to be associated with strong feelings (eg shame, love) with indirect rather than direct questions (What changes in your school would enable you to do better what you're trying to do? Why? Can you give me an example of a really good day? bad day?) (Nias 1991 p150)

This was in some ways similar to my attempt to evaluate an in-service BEd course of which I was leader. That, too, centred on capturing the subjective reality of day-to-day teaching. A representative sample of forty of my former students were followed up in their schools and I used questions which specifically asked for reports of events. (French 1988) At the pilot stage, I learned that questions that sounded natural enough to me as a tutor, eg on philosophy of teaching, mismatch between intention and practice, or on specific themes like mixed ability teaching, were the least effective. Responses were short and stilted, or long and laboured. On the other hand, reports of events selected from within very wide limits by the teachers themselves, eg of a time when they went home very excited about their work, and a time when they felt they were bashing their head against a brick wall, were both lively and engaging. They helped break down any formal barriers, gave a picture of the teachers' real concerns and provided us both with a helpful focus for conversation. A very similar approach was used as

part of the evaluation of initial teacher training courses with existing students in college. (French 1992) Prompts were again indirect such as, Tell me about a day you were dreading on teaching practice.

These studies gave me confidence that sensitive asking for reports of events could help overcome problems of selection and observer perception. In the next sections I give an account of the genesis and development of this technique. My argument is that the way in which I use it does not direct respondents in specific directions and that the focus of the agenda remains with them.

The Critical Incident Technique

The critical incident technique seeks stories as data. 'Critical' conjures up an incident with far-reaching repercussions, like the lesson on swearing, the trigger for the headlines and political turmoil around Sutton Centre, a progressive school. (Fletcher et al 1985 p87) That is misleading. For example, I used the technique in a study of INSET graduates, where my interest was

in the ordinary lives of quiet workers at the chalkface, in corridors and classrooms, at their desks and duplicators, in their labs and their Wendy Houses, in playgrounds and committees.....What was it that made such teachers tick, wound them up, ran them down or made them go cuckoo? And what part, if any, did the INSET BEd play in this humble drama?
(French 1988 p8)

The technique was first formulated by Flanagan and used to identify key factors in performance. He directed the US Army Air Forces Aviation Psychology Programme during World War 2. After the war, he established a research institute and applied the technique to industry and public service. He described it as

a procedure for gathering certain important facts concerning behavior in defined situations. It should be emphasized that the critical incident technique does not consist of a single rigid set of rules governing such data collection. Rather it should be thought of as a flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand. (Flanagan 1954 p335)

Its two basic principles may be summarized as follows:

- (a) reporting of facts regarding behavior is preferable to the collection of interpretations, ratings and opinions, based on general impressions;
- (b) reporting should be limited to

those behaviors which, according to competent observers, make a significant contribution to the activity. (Flanagan 1954 p355)

Isolating factors in the performance of defined tasks and so identifying training needs found a natural home in the forces and on the shop floor. The need for being unambiguous in defined settings was also stressed more recently in advice on how to use the technique to gather data to improve customer relations in a public service. Caple and Deighan (1986), the authors of that advice and example, claimed its use avoided data that are too generalised and abstract, are inconsistent in how they are reported, or confused by opinion and interpretation. They echoed Flanagan in saying that it

- (a) reports facts regarding behaviour, rather than interpretations, ratings and opinions based on general impressions;
- (b) limits reports to those behaviours which, according to competent observers, make a significant contribution to the activity.

An 'incident' is any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act.

An incident is 'critical' when it occurs in a situation where the purpose of the act is fairly clear to the observer and its consequences sufficiently definite to leave little doubt as to its effect. (Caple and Deighan 1986 Annex 1)

From what I have said about feelings, personal reality, and the lack of precision in education, this seems to offer little. But the impression of observer precision given above is misleading. Caple and Deighan described how data came from interviewing patients, the aim being to encourage them to describe in their own words what happened to them in their first contacts with hospital and staff. Interviewers led subjects through a step by step account of their experiences, prompts at hand to ensure full coverage, but the main point to note is that the patients themselves were the 'competent observers'.

The need to take seriously what is experienced by those a system is there to serve reflects my own position. (French 1994) It is also true to Flanagan, who, "in a less well-known article, argued that aims in education were not just for experts to state. They should be supplemented by accounts of adult behaviour, "simply stated in terms which can readily be agreed to by typical parents and citizens". (Flanagan 1950 p321) Here are two examples of questions Flanagan suggested should

be put to a random sample of adults on the aims of having an appreciation of culture and the arts and being a good citizen:

Think of the last time your ignorance of human knowledge or the arts got you into trouble. Describe the situation exactly and tell me just what it was that you didn't know that prevented you from acting normally in this situation.

Think of something you saw done by a fellow citizen during the past week which made you doubt whether he was a good citizen or not...State specifically what the individual did and what you feel he should have done. (Flanagan 1950 pp322)

The first question reflected the American belief in pragmatism, the second the more generally accepted view that there are no experts in morals. What interested me was the loosening of 'defined situations' to those defined by respondents and picked out by their values.

Another variation, which widened 'incidents' to episodes and firmly placed feelings at the centre, was used by Herzberg, Mauser and Snyderman (1967) in a workplace study. Workers were asked to recall periods when they felt very good or very bad about their jobs.

In summary, the identification of factors was to depend neither on the a priori judgments of psychologists or managers nor on the generalizations of workers. It would be derived directly from analysis of the forces reported to affect morale during specific episodes in our respondents' lives. (Herzberg et al 1967 p15)

Reporting was to be as factual as possible but judgement had to be exercised in the selection of episodes. Caple and Deighan (1986) claimed the technique avoided opinion and interpretation, but there is an inevitability and, in some uses, a strength in their presence, as will be shown in the next section.

There were several features that attracted me to the critical incident technique in its more flexible uses:

interpretations and opinions were shown in choices and actions and were therefore likely to be authentic rather than merely avowed;

respondents reported their own experiences in their own words;

respondents did not have to be led through previously defined situations, but reported events which had significance for them.

Influential Models for my use of the Technique

A study which explored beliefs through experiences was carried out in connection with the Schools Council Project in Moral Education. Secondary school pupils were asked for one example of a situation in which an adult had treated them well and one example of a situation in which an adult had treated them badly. There was no attempt to impose definitions. (McPhail et al 1972) A related study by Kitwood (1980) elicited stories to get a clearer understanding of adolescent values. Kitwood conducted in-depth interviews based on a wide-ranging schedule. The lead-in paragraph and some prompts will convey the idea:

Below are listed 15 types of situation which most people have been in at some time. Try to think of something that has happened in your life in the last year or two, or perhaps something that keeps on happening, which fits each of the descriptions. Then choose the ten of them which deal with the things that seem to you to be the most important, which cover your main interests and concerns, and the different parts of your life. When we meet we will talk together about the situations you have chosen. Try beforehand to remember as clearly as you can what happened, what you and others did, and how you yourself felt and thought. If you like, write a few notes to help you keep the situations in mind.

- 1 When there was a misunderstanding between you and someone else (or several others).....
- 2 When you got on really well with people.....
- 5 When you felt angry, annoyed or resentful.....
- 8 When you felt you had done something well.....
- 11 When you made a serious mistake.....
- 15 When you began to take seriously something that had not mattered much to you before.....

(Kitwood 1980 pp48/49)

Crolley (1982) used Kitwood's schedule as a blueprint for a different purpose which was nearer the roots of the technique, identifying training needs. The first part of the lead-in paragraph and some items follow:

Below are listed 15 types of situation which most Probation Officers have been in at some time. Try to think of something that has happened in your professional life within the last year or so which fits each of the descriptions. Then choose 10 of

them which deal with the things that seem to you to be the most important.....

- 1 When you felt you had done something well.....
 - 6 When you had a problem you could not handle.....
 - 7 When you thought you had let somebody down.....
 - 13 When you had no support...
 - 14 When there was a misunderstanding between you and someone else.....
 - 15 When you were worried about a client.....
- (Crolley 1982)

These ideas helped me design an instrument to learn more about teachers' working lives and training needs and provide data for the review of an INSET BEd. A sample of teachers who had graduated between 1981 and 1986 were interviewed. They did not know the degree was a focus of interest. The approach was retrospective and indirect and reflected the concept of evaluation as illumination. (Parlett & Hamilton 1972) A summary version of the introduction and a few prompts will convey the idea.

I want to build up a bank of stories that will give me a richer insight into the sort of things that teachers see as significant in their professional lives. Please pick out those situations which ring a bell with you, which prompt you to recall events that actually occurred. You are not expected to respond to all the items, but it would be helpful if you could recall incidents, occasions, events relating to up to ten of them.... I am interested in details of what **actually happened, in factual accounts of situations** (this includes facts about how you felt and what led up to those feelings)...

Try, then, to recall a situation, particular time or a period when..

- 1 you went home really excited about your work
 - 2 you felt really inadequate as a teacher
 - 6 you felt you were bashing your head against a brick wall
 - 8 you saw a group of pupils in a new light
 - 13 you lifted yourself out of a rut
 - 14 you felt your training had been useless.
- (French 1988)

The 'competent observers' were the respondents, feelings were accepted as significant and the situations did not have to be incidents where the point of an activity was transparent or where it was easy to pick out behaviour which made a significant contribution to it. It was a kind of limited ethnography, a vicarious eavesdropping.

Incidents, Episodes and Encounters

Critical incident questions can go beyond reports of limited actions and happenings to cover more extended times and episodes and to give emphasis to how people felt. Respondents' stories do not have to be critical in the sense of being earth-shattering, but they are picked out as being of personal significance and, crossing the barriers of the expected, give an insight into what people expect under normal circumstances. Worries about the reactions and possible reactions of others loom large. The stories often involve relationships, working with and in spite of others; central human concerns.

One of my INSET BEd respondents recalled a time when he went home feeling particularly excited. His class of eleven year olds had worked out a piece for assembly on the theme of good and evil. John said the play was risky and he shared the risk with the children. Based on the story of David and Goliath, it featured Tarzan and the Mafia. He was worried that it might go down badly: it was a departure from the usual pattern of readings. The Head might construe it as blasphemous. In fact it went well, and the best moments were behind the scenes, the exchanging of thumbs up signs.

I felt that we were all a unit, we were one. I had an authority without insisting on claiming it merely because I was an adult or a qualified teacher. The audience appreciated it ever so much and for the first time ever in assembly applauded spontaneously. We produced something rather special and I think we learned some valuable things about ourselves. I really enjoyed the close rapport I had with the pupils. It was the closest I've ever had in my career. It was a moment of kinship, personal victory over a fairly unrewarding hostile environment as far as I was concerned, and indeed for some of the pupils, some of them very unacademic.

(French 1988 pp29/30)

This story illustrates how the unusual can shed light on the day-to-day, in this case by putting it in sharp relief to the lack of close rapport, of recognition, and the normality of hostility and anxiety. Putting together and performing the play was the sort of episode Woods (1993) has called a "critical event". Marked by challenge, community, shared trauma and celebration, there is a breaking down of barriers as people learn valuable things about themselves.

Sikes, Measor and Woods refer to critical phases and incidents, which "reveal, 'like a flash-bulb', the major choice and change times in people's lives." (Sikes,

Measor and Woods 1985 p57) Strauss used 'critical incident' to refer to times which force people to see themselves in a new light, to recognize that they are not the same as they were, "turning points in the onward movement of personal careers". (Strauss 1977 p93) 'Turning points' was to emerge as a helpful idea as my work on this study progressed.

My use of the technique had continued with monitoring initial teacher training courses (French 1992). Student respondents were asked to tell me about good sessions in college, pointless sessions, times when they felt inadequate in school and times when things went well, days they looked forward to on teaching practice and those they dreaded. I also asked them to describe a teacher who was in the right job and another who was like a square peg in a round hole. This helped reveal the students' values and priorities in teaching and triggered conversations about the teachers who had taught them. Some in-service BEd graduates had talked about the influence particular people had had on them, often unknowing tutors. "It is in encounter with other human beings that much education takes place". (Reid 1962 p91) 'Critical encounters' became an extension to a very flexible tool.

Having noted the importance of the interview questions in countering problems of bias and selectivity, and given the reasons for my choice of method and technique, the actual formulation of the questions I used in this study is discussed more fully in the next chapter, which describes the research process.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Table 3.1 shows how the fieldwork proceeded. Informal contacts with students are not included.

Table 3.1 Record of Fieldwork

Autumn 1989 Unstructured interviews with the course leader, head of student services, careers adviser, counsellor, a tutor, a front office assistant, and the chaplain.

Registry provided the names of eight student contacts: four young students and four matures, each subgroup with two females and two males and each pair having one student with high points on entry and one with low entry points.

Jan First interviews with students.

to May
1990

Informing themes were: deciding to come; breaking with the past; finding a new routine. (At the end of the academic year one student failed and left, another transferred elsewhere. The registry provided replacement contacts.)

Oct Second interviews with students.

1990

to Feb Focus on college work: informing themes were
1991 routines and attitudes to study.

Mar Third interviews with students.

to

Nov
1991

Focused on the informal: prompts sought insights into keeping going, finding support, developing a sense of direction, and how students changed. (One student left college and was not replaced.)

Mar Final interviews with students.

to Aug
1992

Looked forward to the end of the course and beyond and back over their experiences for hurdles and turning points.

May
1993

Final interviews with two students who had spent a year in France and then returned to complete the course. After the interviews these two were asked for their reactions to the analysis.

Initial Conversations with Staff

My previous work using the critical incident technique (French 1988, 1992) had been concerned mainly with teaching in schools and teacher training. I had more experience of the target groups than I did on this occasion. My experience of the BA was limited to a small teaching commitment some years in the past and to an official role as a member of the college bureaucracy. The BA group, while having many characteristics and concerns in common with the BEs, were different in their ambitions and destinations and were taking a less focused course. I therefore decided to begin the process by interviewing people who had a closer knowledge of the students than I had.

My initial interviews were with a range of staff who were in regular contact with BA students. An alternative would have been to use some students to help give me an initial orientation, through informal conversations as the opportunity arose or by arranging interviews. That approach would be consistent with my arguments on the dangers of bias in a staff view, but it assumes, on my part, an ability to strike up a rapport and deploy potentially fecund questions from the outset and I lacked the confidence to do that. Colleagues could give me their perspectives and bring my initial understanding nearer to the point I had enjoyed in previous studies.

I wanted impressions on the students' college careers, from first contacts to departure, and so it seemed reasonable in the first instance to hold conversations with the course leader, the head of student services and the careers adviser. Together they would be aware of academic, less formal and employment concerns. I knew these colleagues well and I knew that they would be happy to cooperate. In their turn, they then suggested others; the counsellor, a lecturer who had recently been a VI Form tutor, the person who gave resident Polhill students their room keys and issued grant cheques, and the chaplain. It was an opportunistic and snowball selection, a "judgement sample" (Burgess 1984 p55). Others might well have selected differently.

The conversations began with a request for general impressions as above and were open-ended. I restricted myself to asking for clarification and elaboration, saying as little as possible. The conversations were tape-recorded. Precise replication of the way the questions were put and followed up would be impossible. They served their purpose in giving me the confidence to draw up prompts for the first critical incident schedule and they also gave me pointers on the constitution of the group of students to track through.

The course leader said that matures were "different". They tended to stress the enjoyment of learning and personal satisfaction whereas students straight from school were more instrumental. Both groups were "vulnerable", those away from home for the first time and matures who could be seeking a new direction from an unsatisfying home life, but he felt the matures had an advantage in being more ready to admit their failures. There were structural hurdles for all to overcome: the choice of subjects, the first assignment and first year exams. "Oddballs" tended to go in the first year:

If anything it highlights their oddities, which perhaps living in a community would do anyway.

The second year was a comparatively easy time, although moving out of college accommodation at the end of the first year could be a watershed for young students, who had to decide whether to share a house, rent a bedsit or find digs. Independence in life and in learning were the primary goals of the BA course.

The head of student services talked of "student stress" and of "homesickness" in a place where showing it would lose "street credibility". For young males particularly, the peer pressure to appear "cool" could result in loneliness. It was hard to balance personal expectations and course demands. Alongside vocational choice went making sense of oneself and the world, which made the separation phase at the end of the course hard for some.

The careers adviser said that students knew little about what was needed to take particular career paths and some left it "far too late to seek advice". Others did not ask for help at all. He wondered how intelligent people could come to the end of a course of higher education without having thought about what they were going to do. It seemed hard for them to face up to deciding what to do with their lives after college. There was almost an obsession with "assessment", with the "academic" taking pride of place at the expense of personal qualities, particularly the ability to take important decisions of personal direction.

The counsellor talked of the challenge of a new life at college at a time when asking for help was seen as shaming. For young people the big tasks were "making friends and coping away from home". There would be "highs and lows". It was not just studying and getting a job, "perception of self" was involved. Establishing a "routine and a sense of direction" were key. It was like finding "a satisfactory route through a maze". In the second year students had more space and time, which set its own challenges. Studying for some had been equated

with frantic effort at A level and boredom could set in. The matures were different. Many had been through years of agonising before deciding to come and they expected to find more problems than they did. Some of the younger students had not made a positive choice at all and being at a College of HE rather than Polytechnic or University could be hard for them to accept.

The tutor, newly appointed from school, talked about the problems his VI formers had with making decisions and how they would put off facing them. Some pupils were swept with the tide into higher education, often dogged by the unrealistic aspirations of their parents. Those who achieved only Cs and Ds turned, often disappointed, guilty and bewildered, to the Colleges of HE. Once they were away from home, the students' most pressing need was to find "the security of a routine". Any routine would do. There had to be an anchor. But routines could give a deceptive comfort and it was "hard to break out of the security of a routine you knew to be harmful". This tutor had been the Student Union president in a College of Education where he had helped to set up a drop-in counselling service to help with "homesickness, friends, sex, wrong decisions, coping with the course and keeping up peer credibility". Colleges of Education were distinctive places, often small "curious worlds". You could "disappear into them" for three years and then face another traumatic severance.

The person with the keys to rooms and grant cheques to issue said:

You look at them and then you see their parents go, and you think, O My God! They come in, don't know where to go to, but they always seem to land at my desk... For me the deadline is Christmas, they'll see a difference in their home life and they'll be eager to get back... Second and third years don't bother so much about home at holiday times. They've made that break.

There were "tearaways", "mixers" and "loners".

I can pick them out the day they arrive. I think I'll have to keep an eye on her. I think we've got one here. She starts by hugging the walls and then you walk into the dining room, she's by herself. Doesn't look up.

Mature women were different. Their burdens could be heavy as they combined college with looking after children. There were so many marriages "on the verge" of break-down but the matures would "get through no matter what". It was a matter of sheer guts and determination.

For the chaplain, categories could be no substitute for closer accounts of individuals. It was very difficult to generalise. Some students seemed to be swept along into higher education from school and they came to a College of Higher Education because their low grades had ruled out University or Polytechnic. Some came for the course, others because of the place. The matures, on the other hand, had made a positive choice to come; to get their brains working again and to break out of a long domestic routine. It was a break with the past, which could reflect or cause marital tensions. For younger students coming to college was their first significant event after school. There was homesickness to overcome and relationships, finding friends, loomed large in their lives. Matures more often needed to prove their worth to themselves. Their reactions to very respectable grades could be out of all proportion and they could resent the cavalier approach of some younger students and become a continuation of the adult threat to them. The chaplain told me that students came to him at times of guilt or crisis; very often they had no religious background but they were looking for something confident to be said or at least the consolation of having tried to explore the Truth. It was "folk religion", a search for security.

From the initial conversations with colleagues, making the decisions to come to college, breaking with the past and finding new routines became the "sensitising concepts" (Glaser and Strauss 1967), the informing ideas behind the items in the first interview schedule with students, the construction of which I discuss in detail later. They were contexts common to all students, BEds as well as BAs, and I could easily recognise and relate to them. What these initial conversations had done was to broaden my perspective from professional preparation, schools and teaching practice and bring more clearly to mind what I already knew about the anxieties and tasks that students faced. The second and subsequent schedules were based on my analyses of the students' data as they emerged. My sensitivity in carrying out those analyses had also been sharpened by my colleagues.

Selecting Students as Key Informants

The group of students to be tracked through their course would be very small to enable successive interviews to be held with them and to give me the optimum opportunity to learn about their experiences and concerns. Any idea of probability sampling was ruled out. Selected students would be acting as individual key informants or research collaborators. It could not be a representative sample in any statistical sense, but the selection of a group could take into account what I had learned from my own experience and from talking with colleagues. As well as

giving me an orientation on prompts for the student interviews, they had also centred my thoughts on the constitution of the group.

A wide range of abilities and ages enrolled on the BA Combined Studies. There were differences in age, entry qualifications, and gender, although women made up by far the greater proportion. The College of Education had had a predominantly female entry and a long history of attracting local mature women, which had continued with the diversified courses. It was clear in my experience and from conversations with staff that the matures were different from younger students in motivation, in their understandings and their anxieties. Informants should therefore include **both mature and younger students.**

Conversations with staff had also brought out the significance of A Level grades. BA students could drift into Bedford College of HE, because their grades were so modest that they had little choice if they wished or were expected to pursue higher education. **Entry points at A Level** would be of interest, not only in terms of previous knowledge, but also in relation to attitudes and self-esteem. It could well be helpful to get to know some people who were well qualified for entry and some who were not.

Gender could also highlight relevant issues. The head of student services had said that young men were the most subject to peer pressure to appear cool. The chaplain had said that matures needed to prove their worth to themselves; disappointed reactions to quite satisfactory grades could be out of all proportion. In my experience with teachers and teacher trainees, that was true of many female matures. On such grounds it seemed sensible to me that **key informants should include both genders.**

With the above considerations in mind, I decided that the small group of students should contain matures and traditional students, students with high A Level points on entry and some with low points, and both males and females. I should stress that, although such variables are traditional in the sense of being commonplace, in particular age and gender, they were chosen because they arose from the experiential knowledge that was pooled in the analysis of the initial conversations. In the words of Strauss (1987 p32), they had to "emerge as relevant" and "earn their way" into the picture.

I did not know any BA students personally, there was none to whom I could immediately relate. Several options were open to me: striking up conversations in social areas, asking colleagues to allow me into their sessions to trawl for collaborators, issuing a general invitation

by word of mouth through tutors or the notice board. I had used general invitations to arrange group interviews before and, although they had resulted in both overlarge and very sparse groups, I had never been left high and dry. From such contacts it would have been possible to network out to other informants. I could, however, see no advantage in that. My aspiration was to get to know a limited number of individuals as soon as possible and travel through their experiences with them and so I went to the Registry as the neatest and most direct option and asked for eight names: four young students and four matures; within each four, two females and two males, each pair to have one with high A Level points and one with low points. What was to count as high points and what as low points was left to the assistant registrar, based on her experience of the entry grades for BCHE. All the students agreed to help. Given the calculated tidiness of the group, which might give a misleading picture, it is perhaps worth saying again that they were not a proportionate sample but a set of people picked out as potentially fruitful key informants. A contrast cannot formally be made between the key informants and the demographic structure of the BA course.

Student Interviews: timing and style

Conversations with colleagues took place in the autumn of 1989. Interviews with individual students began in early 1990. Sessions needed to be spaced throughout the course to combine continuity and feasibility. I knew from experience how long it could take to find mutually convenient times of at least an hour and that the target periods would have to be extended and flexible. I judged that holding one interview a year with each of the group of eight would be the minimum for me to get a sense of their student careers. The first year interview would concentrate on the process of settling down at college, and the final year interview would look back over the experience and ahead to moving out into a new life. Colleagues had said that the second year was the least demanding and so it seemed a good time for holding two interviews. The students should be well settled by then. The hurdles of first year examinations and, for younger students, moving out of college rooms, would be over, and the pressures of final assessment would be still to come. The decision to interview once in the first year, twice in mid-course, and once in the final year was taken for considerations of time-sampling as well as on practical grounds. All the interviews were taped. This ensured accurate recording and it freed me from taking full notes, which I felt would have been more intrusive than a small cassette recorder.

The interviews were semi-structured by the critical incident questions, elicited experiences becoming the basis for much more open conversations. I had used this style of interviewing before and felt that it would serve my current purposes. The INSET BEd graduates I had followed up in school were former students, but in later work with initial teacher trainees I had not known the interviewees and there was a greater age gap. Those experiences had given me the confidence to believe that using the technique could help overcome power and age imbalance and establish a rapport fairly rapidly.

Prompts, probes, and what might be called 'lubricants' are an important part of the process. They are used to establish detail, to clarify the subjects' perceptions and feelings, to seek elaboration, sometimes to try a tentative commentary, to summarise, to recapitulate, and to help conversations proceed smoothly in an atmosphere of mutual trust. In establishing that trust, revealing something of yourself and of your own background is a significant factor. That kind of sharing of self is what I have referred to as a 'lubricant', playing its part as it does in ordinary conversation between friends. The following extracts, taken from the student interviews in this inquiry, show the process in action. It is far removed from the detailed examination of isolated events associated with some uses of the technique. In the first extract, lubricants are used in establishing shared experience and building up a rapport with Ivan.

Ivan I was working in the public sector.

AAF Oh were you?

Ivan In the Civil Service, yeah.

AAF What were you doing?

Ivan It was an administrative job in the Department of Energy.

AAF Ah I wouldn't know much about that, Department of Energy. I started off life as an Inland Revenue officer.

Ivan Oh no.

AAF That's why I mentioned it. So you were an established civil servant?

Ivan Yeah, signed the Official Secrets Act and all that. (laughs)

AAF So did I. So did I. What did they call you? Were you an Executive Officer or what?

Ivan An admin.

AAF Admin Assistant?

Ivan Assistant first of all and then, about four months before I left, I got to Admin Officer, but it was only for about four months.

It was in the back of my mind I could always stay there. It was exactly how I thought it would be really. Well no, there were some things about it which were quite interesting and I did learn a lot from it.

AAF What did you learn?

Ivan Just the way people adapt and conform. It's very hierarchical. You have these grades: AA, AO, Executive Officer, HEO, and it's quite confusing trying to remember what grade everyone is and you have to relate to them according to their grade.

AAF (Laughs) It hasn't changed has it?

Ivan You sometimes forget who's what grade and you don't know whether to be deferent or not. That gives rise to a lot of humour as well. It is quite an interesting place to work. We had a Grade 7, that's quite high up; he always made a joke out of this grade system. He thought it was funny.

AAF When I was in, there were HEOs, EOs, HCOs, COs, CAs - I'm dredging my memory now.

Ivan HEO, Higher Executive Officer, and you had a Senior Executive Officer, which was above that, and then, parallel to those, you had technical grades, like TIEO, Technical Information Executive Officer, which really proliferated the whole thing. Basically you had to be very like diplomatic.

That early conversation helped us to laugh together and establish a rapport, and, in the event, it was also to shed light on his early departure from college, when he returned to predictability in public service.

The second extract shows critical incident questioning typically going for detail in trying to pin down exactly

what happened, but, on the other hand, it also shows how it need not be restrictive to only one event. Different pressures and events had combined to make Pam doubt whether a degree course at college was really for her.

Pam Well Number 7 (interview schedule item). That tends to sort of come and go.

AAF You doubted that you'd made the right decision. (repeating interview schedule item 7) Can you tell me about a time when it came fairly strongly?

Pam I had a low point after Christmas.

AAF What happened exactly?

Pam Well, things started speeding up and then I had problems at home. My husband's company has actually gone into receivership.

AAF Oh dear, poor old you.

Pam And then I had a day when I had a particularly low mark on something.

AAF When you said things were speeding up, you mean more college work was coming in?

Pam Yes.

AAF So it wasn't just getting work back. It was getting work in?

Pam You'd got assignment dates for early in the new year and you were trying to read the books and things to start the term, with Christmas in the middle. I mean, I'm better off than a lot of people because I've just got one son, who is quite capable of looking after himself.

AAF So you'd got problems on the domestic front and then you got a low mark. What was that for?

Recapitulation and summary helped me understand how Pam saw the situation before I turned back to a specific event, the low mark. Just before that I had clarified what Pam meant by 'things speeding up'. In the next extract, Mark's own words are turned back to him as a way of clarifying his understanding of a situation.

Mark My mother was starting to get on top of me a bit. I remember, just before I left, I thought I

wanted to go. I got in the car and I thought I'm going now, see you Mum.

AAF Get on top?

Mark She was getting a bit irate. I don't know why. Perhaps it was because I was beginning to slob around a bit before I was going back to college, perhaps she thought it was an indication of what I was like at college. It was my attitude she was a bit weary of. It was generally about my room. It's not untidy. There are a lot of things in it and it clutters the place up a bit.

In the fourth extract, Emma had been telling me about a time when she decided to alter her routine. I attempted a commentary and sought elaboration by contrast. She had been at boarding school, which might have been expected to provide a disciplined preparation for her degree course. Emma's reply opened up another agenda item. The conversation turned from workload to space, freedom, and students' attitudes.

Emma It was really when I got extra work from the course on top of the assignments that I really felt it was getting too much.

AAF Very different from school?

Emma Yes, it is, because you have all these free afternoons and things. I mean, even when you had frees at school, you didn't have as much time, but there is a sense of - in the lectures and things - I think some people think, you know at college, you can miss a lot of them, but I've got quite a few lectures and, I suppose quite rightly so, they're keen on everyone to turn up and kick up a fuss if they don't because I think some people were going by the idea that you don't have to go to all the lectures, you know, you just laze around.

Gill, in the fifth extract, had been talking about periods of doubting her decision to come to college and she underlines the importance to her of support from other students. My short prompts elicit further detail and a comment on the perfectionist attitude, including her own, of mature students.

Gill You do form relationships at college, and you do pull each other up. When you're feeling down and when they're feeling down, you pull each other up.

AAF Any pattern?

Gill When assignments are due. ...I think I'm middle-of-the-road. I'm not here to have all fun and games and I'm not as intense as some of them.

AAF Matures?

Gill Yes. I think the matures worry. There's a competitive element with your own personal goals. You're never quite satisfied with the work you put in. That's a terrible niggling thing. I do enjoy it.

The sixth and final illustrative extract is from my final interview with Andrew and shows the use of prompts to check, to summarise and recapitulate. It starts with a summary, a checking device offered for the benefit of both of us, and then turns to the course, ostensibly to fill in a gap in that summary, but prompted by Andrew's remark in an earlier interview when he called it a "Mickey Mouse" course. His response confirms his earlier attitude in part, but he can now attribute some of the blame to himself, to his making a wrong choice in the first place. I then take the opportunity to check back to detail given earlier.

AAF You've talked about turning points like the Tower, the pickle factory, Spenser Road, the girlfriend who crowded you, but how about the course, the academic side of things?

Andrew I don't really think, it's not testing enough, it's not taxing enough. I mean this really, this is the wrong degree for me. I thought it was the right degree when I came in because I thought I'd choose a broad-based degree, English, History, Drama, so that would function as a platform for what I wanted to do as a graduate rather than being specialised too early. But what it's really turned out to be is an extension of my A Levels.....

AAF You did turn down Liverpool University.

Andrew But that was mainly, well two reasons: one, I'd never been to Liverpool, I didn't know if I'd like it, and the second was because it was straight History. I mean it's a good job now because I'm not interested in History so a History degree wouldn't have been much use to me.

AAF Can you remind me about your A Levels?

The extracts illustrate the use of prompts and probes and show the fluidity of the conversations. They show how complete replication of this style of interviewing would be impossible, but give indications of how checks on the data and on interpretations of that data can be part of the process itself. I shall return later to questions of reliability and validity. Before that, I give more detail on the construction of the initial schedule of critical incident questions because of what could be seen as a tension at that point. If the aim was to get the students' authentic accounts of their experiences in terms of what was significant for them, how could the process avoid their being led by questions set by a researcher?

Setting the First Questions

Tomlinson (1989) refers to the dilemma that arises when researchers take seriously the active and the personal in understanding. How can they both explore the topic that they wish to explore and take proper account of the respondents' personal constructions? Tomlinson compares Kitwood's inquiry (Kitwood 1980) into adolescent values, which used critical incident (see p32 of this thesis), with Kohlberg's work on moral development (Kohlberg 1966). Kohlberg's work was firmly based on a Kantian model of morality and invited responses to hypothetical situations. Tomlinson cites Gilligan (1982) to show the dangers of such preformulation and the importance of trying to establish personal meanings. Gilligan's work on abortion counselling challenged the Kantian view of morality which informed Kohlberg's example situations and his analyses. Tomlinson applauds Kohlberg's clarity but there is higher praise for Kitwood, who;

illustrates particular elegance in taking constructivist insights seriously in the pursuit of a chosen topic. It may be noted that Kitwood was able to proceed to more specific questions and queries concerning values once he had allowed his respondents to frame their own contextualised accounts. (Tomlinson 1989 p159)

It is a strength of the critical incident technique that people are asked to give accounts of real situations in their lives. What they did and their reactions to what happened to them can reveal their priorities and their understandings in a most effective way, to themselves as well as to others. Once the stories have been told, the implications can be explored. Tomlinson nonetheless argues that researchers have much to gain from setting out their own understandings and frameworks in advance; it helps them be true to their agendas and more alert to distortions that might stem from those understandings.

He suggests "hierarchical focusing", a procedure in which the researcher details the framework as s/he construes it and then draws up an agenda of questions relating to a given context, going from the general to the particular. He illustrates this in the context of Radio Assisted Practice (RAP) in teaching, in which students' ideas of RAP and then their understanding of the factors affecting its effectiveness are sought, but within boundaries that he has preset: eg input message quality, tutor qualities, student qualities, teacher-student relationships. This context, however, is much more circumscribed than adolescent values or the careers of students. Mystery (Fletcher 1974) is not so apparent in RAP sessions. Boundaries, which all questions must set, can enclose larger or smaller areas and the fencing be rigid or flexible. Tomlinson (1989) notes how data can be analysed from virtually any perspective we might bring to it. This is so and includes frameworks that are not preset but arise during the research process itself. The model here is not the "hierarchical focusing" which he advocates but "progressive focusing", where

it is frequently only over the course of the research that one discovers what the research is really 'about'. (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983 p175)

The use of critical incident by Herzberg et al (1967), Kitwood (1980), Crolley (1982) and French (1988, 1992) does start from general questions, but the procedure then goes from particular to the general. Incidents and episodes, picked out by respondents as having meaning for them, are starting points. Prompts are open-ended to elicit the details on which general analyses are built. Herzberg et al asked for periods when workers felt good or bad about their jobs, Kitwood based his questions around situations involving feelings and relationships, Crolley used his knowledge of the probation service to elicit stories of times when officers felt they were in control or not, and French (1988), similarly, used his knowledge of teaching to gain a fuller insight into teachers' working lives and the factors that affected them. The prompts were open-ended, designed as triggers for a whole range of possibilities. Schedule items asking, for example, for accounts of times of "bashing one's head against a brick wall", "feeling excited" or "feeling inadequate" could involve pupils, colleagues, superiors or parents in a whole variety of incidents and for a whole variety of reasons.

A major aim of this study was the authentic portrayal of students' experiences. Central to that are the affective and the personal and so the final agenda had to arise from what the students told me. I could not predetermine what was important in their private worlds. What to ask

next would become clearer as informants and I talked together. As I shall show in Part Two, where the data are presented, I used a version of grounded theorising (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in formulating items in the successive schedules. But the items on the first schedule, the first questions to students, were not based on my talking with them; they arose from my own experience and from conversations with colleagues. The first schedule was different in that respect. It set the student interviews in motion with some contexts, or core categories, already in mind, and it merits discussion for that reason. The discussion will also address the dilemma Tomlinson referred to by illustrating how items were formulated without foreclosing on the informants' personal agendas.

Colleagues had made me more conscious of the fact that students enter college in very different frames of mind. Their decisions to come to a particular place are bound up with their histories, hopes and disappointments. Some students are almost swept into HE and BCHE, others make a positive choice. The "dimensions" (Strauss and Corbin 1990) of deciding to come can range from very strong to very weak, hardly decisions at all, with consequences for how they see the college and themselves. For some, entry to BCHE may be a high achievement while others can see it as anything but that. Whatever their starting points, becoming a student is a change from a former life, a break which may bring stress and insecurity. The break can be sudden or extended and vary in degrees of completeness. The change from life before college may be no less real for matures but for traditional students it is the most obvious. I was told that second and third years were not so concerned as first years about going home at holiday times. "They've made that break", the office assistant said. A major task is to find a new routine. The tutor said any routine would do. There has to be an anchor. As this inquiry was to show, routines can be tight and methodical, loose and haphazard, fallen into or consciously undertaken, and they can have consequences that are beneficial or harmful. Once you are into one, it can be hard to change.

Deciding to come to BCHE, breaking with the past, and finding new routines were the informing contexts for drawing up the items on the first interview schedule. They are clearly spelt out in the introduction to it:

FIRST INTERVIEW: YEAR ONE 1989/1990

I'm collecting stories of what it's like being a BA student at BCHE. My interest is not just in academic learning, but in the whole thing, eg deciding to come here, making the break from your former life and settling into a new routine with new people, going on vacation and then coming back to college, and so on. I'd like to hear about your hopes and disappointments, tensions and frustrations as well as high spots, unexpected hurdles as well as the pleasant surprises. In sum, I'm interested in the things which have stuck in your mind as you think back over becoming a student, from deciding to apply to settling into your second term.

Please read through the list of memory-joggers below and pick out those which ring a bell with you, which prompt you to recall events in this period of your life. I want you to try and remember the details of what actually happened, including details about how you felt and what led up to those feelings. There's no need to respond to all the prompts, but it would help if you could think of occasions and incidents relating to about eight of them.

You are not expected to name anyone and you will not be named: strict confidentiality will be observed, although general findings might be disseminated within the college if they could conceivably be used for improving the quality of what we do here. Thanks very much for your help.

Please tell me about a time SINCE YOU FIRST BEGAN TO THINK ABOUT COLLEGE when:

- 1 you felt pleased because you were in charge
- 2 you felt very unsure of yourself
- 3 you felt particularly sorry for somebody
- 4 college really lived up to your expectations
- 5 you felt thoroughly let down by it
- 6 you thought you coped brilliantly
- 7 you doubted that you'd made the right decision
- 8 it all seemed too much
- 9 you felt really at home
- 10 you despaired of others
- 11 you decided to alter your routine
- 12 you felt out of things
- 13 you saw other people in a new light.

The highs and lows, which the counsellor talked about, were part of the style and they were allowed for as I tried to balance positive and negative possibilities in the prompts. Feeling independent or unsure, feeling homesick, being among friends or feeling alone, having decisions confirmed, regretting them, settling to a new routine, coping with the demands of the course, being overwhelmed, seeing home through fresh eyes: these were some of the things explicit and implicit in what my colleagues had talked about. They could also arise in the interview but they were not stipulated. Informants were not asked to respond to all the items, about eight out of the final thirteen was suggested. This would require a mix of positive and negative responses, eg feeling pleased and feeling low.

Schedule items were designed to encourage informants to recount events that were important to them, not to tell stories that could be precoded. Feeling pleased to be in charge (Item 1) could relate to the break with a former life and to the feelings of independence that come with embarking on a new life at BCHE, but it did not have to. Mark and Jason told me about times when they were in charge of other people. Feeling very unsure (Item 2) did bring out anxieties about loneliness and worries about coping with the course but it also prompted Nicola to tell me about the trauma of going to school for her A Level results. Feeling sorry for somebody (Item 3) was a possible trigger for stories about homesickness but Emma told me about a disabled friend she knew at school and Nicola about a mature student who faced heavy domestic demands on her time over Christmas. College could live up to expectations or bring feelings of being let down by it (Items 4 and 5) for a host of reasons, social and academic. The impact of what was seen as the ugliness of the Polhill buildings, particularly the Tower, came as a surprise. It all seeming too much (Item 8) could relate to being overwhelmed by workload or new demands of other sorts. I was surprised when Andrew told me about being overwhelmed by the sheer boredom of an empty afternoon.

Some prompts were given the potential to provide cross checking: for example, Item 1 on being in charge and Item 12 on seeing other people in a new light; Item 2 on feeling unsure and Item 13 on feeling out of things. Sometimes they did provide that check, sometimes they did not. The important point is that the contexts of deciding to come to Bedford College of HE, settling into a new routine and breaking with the past helped me to set the items, but they did not set the agenda. The items did not circumscribe any particular outcomes.

The schedule was a clear development from the style I had adopted earlier. This time there was no pilot study

in what was a rolling programme of data gathering, but items were tried out informally and discussed with colleagues and with friends, including young friends. The wording was subjected to refinement until the items sounded as natural as possible to me and to them. The final number of items was a matter for my own judgement, based on previous experience of using the technique.

Reliability, Validity and Ongoing analysis

Reliability refers essentially to the research process, to the scientific trust that it can justifiably command. An approach in which the same results can be guaranteed from the same instrument when it is used by different researchers is not applicable in grounded qualitative studies like this where measurement is not appropriate. Possible responses are not precoded for quantification and comparison. The process is researcher-dependent and not researcher-proofed. At its heart is a developing researcher sensitivity. Precise replication by another person would be impossible. It is even doubtful whether the same person could replicate his/her own work. In this context the issue of reliability has more to do with the clarity of the research process and whether it is demonstrably informed by rational judgement rather than by individual bias and whim.

The notion of reliability takes on a more sophisticated meaning in the open context of qualitative research. The question in this study is not whether the same critical incident schedules would yield the same data and arrive at the same overall account in different hands, whether a future researcher following the same path would elicit the same stories and make the same judgements in their interpretation. Rather, the question is whether the path that was taken in the first place was clearly mapped to enable others to repeat the journey in the metaphorical sense of following it with an informed and critical eye. They will then be in a position to carry out a similar inquiry in a similar setting using similar methods of data collection and analysis. Shimahara (1988) makes much the same point in saying that reliability is enhanced when a complete description of the research process is given, including the context, a statement of the ethnographer's roles and a full account of the data collection and analysis.

Strauss (1987 p10/11) argues that there is an "explicit control" on the research process in the "carefully managed triad of data collection/coding and memoing" through which a researcher tries to make "convincing sense" of "the complexity" of social reality as s/he collects, codes, and interprets data in an ongoing, mutually informing, process. In this study, categories

and interpretations were progressively built from the events and feelings which students reported. Raw data were translated into interpretive frameworks and then further reports, further raw descriptions, were sought in a manner that was guided by the ongoing analysis. Part Two of the thesis illustrates how this took place. The concept-indicator links (Rose 1982), the conceptual coding of empirical indicators (Strauss 1987), which were in this case the student reports, are made explicit in examples.

For Hammersley (1992 p67) reliability is a matter of the consistency with which particular instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions, whereas validity has to do with the accuracy with which a description of particular events represents the category it is intended to represent. In practice, however, it is hard to treat them separately (Rose 1982 p43), reliability being used to maximise ethnographic validity (Shimahara 1988). The interplay of reliability and validity is clear when data collection and analysis proceed together over a long period. Raw information is retrospectively checked and the fit of concepts and legitimacy of interpretations are confirmed by new data or challenged by surprises. The protracted period of time over which the research is conducted itself provides a check on validity through the continuous process of comparison and contrast (Hutchinson 1988). For this study data were consciously collected and sifted over four years.

Unstructured interviews with staff began the process but the critical incident interviews with students then took over the data collection. This reliance on one technique could be a weakness. As Hutchinson (1988) points out, multiple methods increase the wealth of information available to the researcher and diminish bias. However, it would be misleading to classify critical incident interviews too readily under one heading because they can combine a form of vicarious observation, eliciting reports of events, with seeking elaboration, opinion and commentary. A term often used for testing validity by comparing different sources of data is "triangulation", which, as Burgess (1984) makes clear, takes many forms. Sources of data do not have to be different methods, different observers or different interviewers. The fact that student interviews were held successively over an extended period gave not only the chance to check facts but also the opportunity to hear different perspectives on the same events from those who had told me about them in the first place, a form of time triangulation. A less consciously sought bonus was when different students told me about events which others had also described.

My insider's knowledge of the setting was another source of implicit information, what Strauss (1987 p11) calls the "essential" experiential data which give an added sensitivity. It was that which made the recognition of surprises the more telling in this study. The price to be paid for such sensitivity is the danger of bias in experiential knowledge, in the tutor perspective. This has been overcome in part by the fullness of the data from students presented in Part Two. In an educational context, necessarily informed by values, it was also important that the value orientations of the researcher were made as clear as possible; in this case, through the biographical details that I gave in Chapter One.

Like 'reliability', 'validity' is not a straightforward word, which is partly why Hammersley (1992) argues that together they are insufficient in judging research. In ordinary language witnesses are said to be reliable or unreliable, arguments valid or invalid, and statements true or false. An argument can be perfectly coherent and valid in its logic but be based on false evidence so that its conclusions are not true. However, 'truth' is not a straightforward idea. Its unravelling goes back into reliability and validity, into social construction and procedures of discovery and argument. In Chapter Two I argued that to call a representation of a part of social reality 'reliable and valid' and to say that an account is 'true', is not just to make a statement about it, it is to make a claim, and the worth of that claim is established by providing satisfactory answers to the following kinds of question:

Is the account faithful to the facts?

Is the interpretation coherent and consistent?

Does the interpretation/theory work by fitting the facts and by offering an enhanced understanding?

Is the case put forward persuasive?

This discussion has revisited the same questions. Part Two of the thesis presents the students' stories and the way in which sense was made of them progressively and so shows how those questions were addressed in practice.

PART TWO

THE STUDENTS' STORIES

CHAPTER FOUR

INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE HISTORIES

Part Two of the thesis is the longest part. Following the points made on reliability and validity in Chapter Three, there has to be a full account in order to mark out as clearly as possible the route taken. The account should set out the data, the facts about their lives that student informants shared with me, as fully as possible without descending into tedium. It has to show how the analysis arose from the data and demonstrate the interpretation placed upon them with sufficient detail to enable others to check its fit with the facts, its coherence and its consistency, and to make it possible for them to follow with further inquiries.

Much the greater proportion of Part Two is taken up with presenting data from the successive interviews, which tell the stories of the informants' lives during their undergraduate years. These data are interspersed with chapters giving analytical commentaries. I shall return to the rationale behind the presentation of the data and commentaries later in this chapter. Now the informants are introduced in brief accounts of how they came to be at the college and how they fared. There will be some repetition when their stories are told in detail. This is justified in terms of an intention to enable readers to come to know them as well as possible. Such knowledge is needed to test the credibility of the interpretation against their experiences.

I began with eight informants, four direct from school and four matures, and added two replacements for Mark and Jason, who left after the first year. There were students with no or poor A levels and students with comparatively good grades, both females and males.

Table 4.1 The framework for selection

Age	Entry Qualifications	female	male
18+	'Low' A Level points	Nicola	Mark/Dan
18+	'High' A Level points	Emma	Andrew
22+	'Low' A Level points	Gill	Martin
22+	'High' A Level points	Pam	Jason/Ivan

The Students

Notes: A Level points A=10 B=8 C=6 D=4 E=2
'Mature' means over 21.

Nicola was 19, from a comprehensive school in a large Midlands town. She was taking French and English, with Drama as a two year subject. Coming to a college was a big disappointment for her. It was expected that Nicola would go to a university as her sister had done. She did apply to universities but, with hindsight, she called herself "a bit glorious, a bit far-fetched" even to have thought of such places. She told me she was "terribly thick" to get just 6 A Level points; D for English and E for French. Flattened by these results, Nicola wavered about carrying on into higher education at all. She said her parents were "shocked and very disappointed" by her results. They encouraged her not to give up and so she looked through the details of colleges. Her father's friend's daughter had been to BCHE and gave a positive account of it. When Nicola came to see me with Emma to arrange our first interview she was very nervous and unsure of herself. Although her nervousness was still apparent when she graduated (2:2), her story was one of growing self-confidence and self-esteem. In that process she was greatly helped by being allocated to a small hostel on her arrival, a place where she was able to find friendship and informal support.

Mark, 19, came from Manchester, where he went to an independent school and then to FE college. He called himself "the runt of the litter". It was a small litter: he had one brother. That picturesque phrase was, he told me, his way of saying that he was not as intellectual as his brother, who had graduated from university and was living in London. BCHE was not Mark's choice. He knew that university would be aiming too high and had applied for a London polytechnic. D for French and E for General Studies, 6 points, was not enough to earn him a place there. Mark's mother saw BCHE advertised in the paper and sent for forms for him. She thought that Outdoor Recreation and French with Computer Studies would suit him. Mark said his main reason for coming was to enjoy himself and his short career at Bedford bore that out: college work was consigned to the late and early hours. He failed the first year comprehensively and had to leave. Dan was his replacement. Dan had 8 points, C for English and E for Economics. He was the same age as Mark and BCHE was not a positive choice for him either. He really wanted to stay with his friends in Humberside and get an office job, but his applications did not meet with any success. Dan's brother was at art college and their father thought that higher education would be good for Dan too. The Head of VI Form at his comprehensive

school knew someone who had been to BCHE and recommended it. Dan took English and History with Computer Studies. He revelled in the informal social life at college but also did enough to survive the course. Critical to that survival was the timely intervention of an angry tutor, which shook him out of a second-year slough of idleness. Dan graduated with a lower second, but that was not the main point for him. He said he had developed socially and become more his "own person".

Emma was 18 when she came. Her subjects were French and History, with Drama. A farmer's daughter, she had a brother at agricultural college. Emma had been a boarder at an independent girls' school. She had 18 A level points: General Studies B, Theatre Studies C, and Es for both French and Biology. It was a high entry score for the BA Combined Studies at BCHE, but not good enough for a place at either of the two universities where she had applied. Emma did not seem disappointed about that and said she was not keen on them anyway. Big cities were worrying. She was offered a place at a polytechnic and had turned that down. There were doubts in her mind as to whether she wanted to continue into higher education at all until Bedford caught her attention in a guide to colleges in a local library. Hers was a late application but a positive choice. The place and the combination of subjects seemed right. Emma said she would have applied to BCHE in the first place had she known about it. Her mother knew the college's reputation in teacher training and approved of her choice. Emma did not make a close circle of friends, but she did establish good working relationships at BCHE. Taking part in drama productions was her particular joy. She graduated with an upper second, but arguably her greater achievement was, in her words, to "come out of her shell", "face herself" and begin "to like herself as a person". That she did this she attributed to the set of circumstances she found herself in during the time she spent in France, a time of challenge tempered by informal support. Like Nicola, Emma majored in French, which meant spending the third year in France before returning to Bedford for a fourth year to finish her degree.

Andrew was 18 when he came. He had 20 A Level points, very high for the course: B for English, C for General Studies, D for History, and E for Economics. Liverpool University would have accepted him, but, like Emma, he did not relish the thought of a large unknown city. BCHE was a positive choice. He was pleased with his interview and glad to be offered a place. A broad-based course, with the chance to take Drama as well as English and History, seemed right to him, and Bedford was somewhere he knew. His mother lived near the college. Andrew had started school in the town. When his parents divorced,

he went with his father to a neighbouring county and then to the East Midlands, where he took his A Levels. Andrew's early positive reactions to the BA turned to disillusionment with what he saw as its superficiality. He found a group of friends at college or it would be more accurate to say that they found him. In retrospect, he said they were a group he "probably didn't belong in". When he began to break away from them, his life was dominated by a girlfriend, who "suffocated" him until he found the courage to end the relationship. In some ways his college career was a tedious journey for Andrew, but it was a journey through which he learnt to "see things differently" and to take some responsibility as an individual. He graduated with an upper second.

Gill lived locally with her husband. They did not have children. She was 29 on entry to college and had left school when she was 16. Gill had not taken any A levels and so Registry placed her at the bottom end of the points scale. An unconditional offer of a place to read English, Sociology and Drama came as a pleasant surprise to her and she cut short a BTEC course to take it up. Her lack of an A level background was nonetheless something of which she remained acutely aware, seeing it as a stigma, a great disadvantage. Varied experience as a police cadet, air hostess and dental nurse, and her vocational qualifications were played down. She said that degree study demanded much more from her, talking about "this critical thing" and the need to question. It was a new experience to be expected to have an opinion and contribute ideas. The BA was not her first choice, a BEd was ruled out by her lack of a Mathematics GCSE, but Gill threw herself into the course. Determined but apprehensive, she sought help from the counsellor. As she changed, cracks in her marriage began to show and then widened until a final break-up. Gill said taking the degree was both the worst and the best thing she had done, but her priority was clear in her actions. She drove herself to a level of anxiety and illness which would have been disastrous had it not been for the intervention of a tutor and the support of friends. They were crucial in helping her through to an upper second and a new life. Gill said the course gave her "new eyes" and "touched everything".

Martin was 26 when he came to BCHE and, like Gill, he had no A levels. He was grateful to Bedford as the only college to call him for interview and for then giving him the opportunity to read for a degree. He was taking English and History with Drama and said he was "very lucky to be here". His only academic qualification was an English O Level, taken in the evenings at FE college. A critical encounter there was meeting a tutor who saw his potential, befriended him and advised him to apply

to colleges of higher education on exceptional entry. It was some years before Martin felt able to act on that advice. He came from a rural family with no educational pretensions. He said he "sort of broke the mould" and that his mother would not have approved. She had died three years earlier. Martin lived with a married sister, where his father had also made his home. Since he left school Martin had spent most of his time working on a small farm. "Not a great socialiser", he found living in hall hard going. The activities of the younger students had no appeal for him: his priority was getting through the course, balancing the "daunting workload" for the three subjects. College made him nervous and he went to the counsellor for help. Meeting Sarah, a young student who worked with him on a project, was another critical encounter. She became his greatest support. After the first year they lived out together. Sarah helped him through crises of confidence. Martin graduated with a 2:2. He said the course gave him "another view" and "a bit more freedom to choose". He chose to stay in Bedford with Sarah and found himself an office job.

Pam was 42 when she became an undergraduate. She lived near Polhill with her husband and son. She had left school when she was 16 to train as a secretary. Her first job was in a university which had interested her in academic books. Pam started an A level in Philosophy at the college's FE site, but a change of job had ruled out her attendance at the classes. When her son was working for his public exams, she began studying again and achieved two A levels by correspondence courses: Economics C and History B, 14 points, high for a mature entrant to BCHE. She applied when her son was applying to university. Pam's subjects were History and Geography with Romanticism and Realism. She started the degree to give her an interest, but the system of continuous assessment and the competitive culture among her mark-conscious peers came as something of a shock to someone used to studying on her own. She also found the course difficult after the clear guidance and model answers of her correspondence school. Pam graduated with a lower second, having found it hard to keep up her motivation for the final year. A two year diploma course would, she felt, have suited her better. She said the course had helped her to "see things from different angles" and "make a reasonable statement about more things," but there was little apparent change in her as a person.

Jason was 24 when he came to BCHE. At his grammar school he had earned 22 A level points - Biology A, Chemistry B, Physics D - and a place at Imperial College. He had passed his first year examinations there but chose to leave, liking neither the course nor the institution. Jason stayed in London and joined a community theatre

group. Before coming to Bedford, he tried unsuccessfully to set up in business offering cycling holidays. That would have been his preferred option. Once at college, Jason kept up what he called "the other sides of his life": working part-time in London and visiting his girlfriend in Nottingham. He lived out with two students he admired for their "literary style". They left the course and Jason transferred to a polytechnic to major in Drama. Ivan, his replacement, was 22, a young mature with 16 points, who had also had experience of another institution and another career. Ivan went to a VI form college, where he passed three A levels: Sociology B, Psychology D, and French E. He was offered a place at polytechnic to read Psychology but did not take it up, to his parents' disappointment. A degree was expected of him. Ivan at home out of work proved to be a strain. When he got an office job in government service he moved out into a flat. In the evenings he studied for A level English. His E was not enough to enable him to take a degree in English as he had hoped to do. Ivan felt that he should nonetheless enrol for a degree and gave up his job to read Sociology at polytechnic. After a month he transferred to BCHE so that he could take at least some English. Sociology and Romanticism and Realism made up his programme. However, he found taking three subjects hard to manage. Ivan might have coped if he had not had a room in college and been swept into the activities of a group of younger students. When he moved out to share a house with them, it exacerbated the strains and guilt he felt. The tensions became such that he left.

Full accounts of these informants' experiences while they were students at BCHE are given in the chapters which follow. They are the core of the thesis and the thinking behind how they have been presented needs to be made clear. It was not a straightforward task.

In the first place, the inquiry did not set limits to what could count as student experience, by, for example, placing boundaries at the college gates or restricting interest to academic concerns. The semi-structured nature of the questioning left informants a very broad range of possibilities as to what they chose to tell me about. The approach was intrinsically untidy.

Secondly, the case histories are more than narratives which tell what these students did and what happened to them. They reveal their priorities, their thinking and sense of significance over the years of their student careers. Personal meanings are central to the purposes of this inquiry; they determine experience. Consequently data are presented to a large extent in the students' own words, which adds a further element of untidiness.

The case histories are presented in stages and follow the pattern in which the interviews were held: ie one in the first year, two in the second year, and one in the final year. This breaks up individual narratives, but it has two major advantages. It enables their experiences at different points in the course to be read alongside each other so that what they have in common may be more clearly discerned, and makes it easier to show how the successive interview schedules grew out of the data.

Each interview lasted a minimum of 45 minutes, some were twice as long, and they were tape-recorded. The analysis was done by a process of coding and consolidation to a point of "saturation", using the "constant comparative method". (Strauss 1987, Strauss and Corbin 1990) It was not a matter of sorting all the situations and events into categories for a frequency count, an analytical approach I had used in an earlier study of teachers' lives in school. (French 1988) In this case, ideas were continuously related and concepts refined to account for the data. Data were not assigned to different piles but were passed under the lens of sensitizing concepts, which were adjusted as fresh data became available. The key concepts became fewer in number, more abstract and greater in their power to account for the data as the coding became "selective". (Strauss and Corbin 1990)

Particular events such as Andrew hiding in his room when he first arrived, Ivan trying to break the code and play a part in student banter, Pam looking for clues on the ideal essay, Nicola copying out too many notes from books, Martin trying to enter "this big college ring", Emma beginning to like herself as a person, and Gill finding "new eyes", became subsumed as examples of how they managed 'social, academic and personal exposure'. The successful management of exposure was linked to 'transformation', which, it is argued, is the heart of the educational process. A picture is a common and useful device in explanation (Thouless and Thouless 1990). Here, a picture with two images equally in the foreground, a ledge to represent the exposure which students faced and a lens to convey the idea of their changing perceptions, helps illuminate these concepts. The metaphors of the ledge and the lens offer a way of seeing the student informants' experiences as examples of how transformation can occur.

Presenting the case histories in stages has enabled the intervening chapters of commentary to show how one set of data informed the setting of the questions to be asked in the next round of interviews. To that extent it illustrates the ongoing research process as it occurred in time. However, the commentaries also relate data to concepts that emerged in later stages of analysis. Some

of the connections were made with retrospective insight. The commentaries cannot display the process of analysis in a strictly temporal sequence but they are true to it.

In grounded inquiry there is a backwards and forwards movement between old and new data. Looking backwards by the informants was specifically encouraged when they revisited experiences they had told me about before, particularly at the final stage. Another form of help in testing analytical concepts came when Dan and Ivan took the place of Mark and Jason in the second year. Their stories from the first year provided a valuable check. An attempt has been made to make this clear.

No attempt has been made to impose a common framework and force data into a common mould. That would have been inappropriate. The stories are the stories of different individuals. Some selection from raw data, however, had to be made; it would have been tedious and unhelpful to give full transcripts.

One principle of selection was to avoid repetition in individual case histories. Repetitive data were omitted except where consolidation or emphasis was thought to be helpful. Presented data are intended to be sufficient to give illustrative backing to analytical concepts.

Another principle of selection was to include striking or unusual data: for example, in the first year; Martin saying he had "so many people to say Hello to", Gill losing confidence in all her past knowledge, and Nicola saying she was "terribly thick". Data like these bring out very clearly these students' insecurity and were a first step in arriving at the management of exposure as a key idea in the process of transformation.

A third principle of selection was that, within the successive individual case histories, any indicators of progression towards transformation should be included.

Within the case histories emboldening highlights words that illuminate analytical concepts. In the commentaries emboldening picks out the ideas behind the successive interview schedules and the concepts used in formulating an overall interpretation of the students' experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FIRST YEAR INTERVIEWS

NICOLA

(19 yrs old on entry: 6 A level points)
(Taking French, English and Drama)

Our first interview was in January 1990. Nicola had been in college for a term and had been home for Christmas.

College was second best. Nicola had applied to Leeds and Sheffield Universities. Looking back, she felt she was "a bit glorious, a bit far-fetched" even to think of such places. The memory of results day at school was vivid.

I went in to collect them. I decided not to open them in front of everybody else. I disappeared - my stomach was turning, oh it was so bad - and opened them up. I'd convinced myself that I hadn't done fantastically well, best to think lower. But, in the back of my mind, I was still thinking - well, I hoped that I'd have done better. Oh Gosh, this is **really embarrassing! To think that I could have applied and thought that I might have got into them.** I ended up with a D for English and an E for French, failed History. I'm sorry, I'm terribly thick, you can probably tell by my results. My parents were shocked and very disappointed, but they were eager for me to carry on. I was totally unsure. I had a guide to colleges, I was flicking through and Bedford stuck out. My Dad's friend's daughter came here and thought the town was pretty good and the college was well-known. I came to look around. They didn't interview me at all.

Coming to college was the first time that Nicola had been way from home for any length of time. She lit up when she spoke about Caves Lane, a residential annexe for about thirty students. People were from mixed courses and years and were very friendly to her. "We're going down the 'pub. Do you want to come along?" The warmth of that early invitation was clear as she recalled it, but getting to know people had not been easy.

They don't go into each others' rooms too much, so in the beginning it was a case of having to go into the kitchen and sit and listen to people's conversation to gradually get to know them and it was hard to begin with. I felt I can't go back to my room and sit on my own because I'd never get to know anyone that way.

When we met Nicola was already into a work routine. Putting off assignments and then staying up all night in a final panic was, she said, not for her. Doing a little work on assignments each day meant that she was able to go out with a clear conscience. She budgeted her money as well as her time.

I'm not the sort of person that goes out every night. I keep to the Polhill bar or sometimes I go to the Fox and Hounds. Tonight there's a disco at Swift's, it's free for students, scrooge again. I imagine the drinks will be more expensive to make up for it. Luckily I've no overdraft, fingers crossed, and I'm pushing myself not to get one. You have to be careful with money.....I got worried in the first term though, thinking it's the first time with a grant and I was wary about how much I'd have left. Well, I ended up with £20 at the end of term.

Nicola was happy with Combined Studies. She was not immersed in one subject and faced new challenges.

I've had this photoplay to do for my Drama. You have to develop a play, a slide show and in the background a tape-recording. This was handed in on Friday. I've never done anything like that before and I thought I'm going to have real trouble with this, but when I finally got round to it and got my idea together, when the slides came back and I'd done the sound track, I felt I'd achieved something. If wasn't on this course I'd never have done anything like that. I don't know whether the marker will think it's come out well, but I feel really pleased. I chatted about it quite a bit with other students.

Although she came across as very nervous during the interview, Nicola seemed to have settled into college. She felt pleased to be less reliant on her sister, who had always been there, one step above her in school, but she went out of her way to tell me about when her sister came to stay and thoroughly approved both the hostel and the college.

I think for me in a way it's a much better place to be than any university. I think I'm much better because I imagine that at university or poly, somewhere bigger than this, I'd feel probably just alone and I couldn't cope perhaps. My sister loves Caves Lane. A bit of luck being there. Fingers crossed, I might be able to stay in Caves Lane again next year. I've only been home half term and Christmas.

I want to do a PGCE. It's been at the back of my mind, but this past term's reinforced my idea of wanting to go into teaching, especially seeing the BEds and hearing what they have to say.

MARK

(19: 6 points)

(Outdoor Recreation, French and Computer Studies)

My brother said, "It's a good laff, it's good work and you'll enjoy it," and that's the main reason I came, to enjoy it.

Mark was at Camp America when his results came through and polytechnic was ruled out. His mother sent for the forms for BCHE. Mark went along with the idea and seemed pleased to be at college. He had the confidence to drive himself here, but he described his arrival as a time when he felt very unsure of himself.

I thought, well, you're at college now. You've just got to walk in through the outside there, stackload of cases, pushing them through. I managed to drive down and I got all my stuff out and I was wondering what it was going to be like. I was thinking where do I go? What do I do? Might as well put my foot in it and find out and I sort of realised when I asked somebody that **we were all in the same boat, totally unsure about the place.**

The brochure had not prepared him for the stark sixties style Polhill buildings but he enjoyed the company.

The mixture of people in the first year that we've got is good. Obviously there are more women than men as usual, but the people that surround me within the **circle of friends, they're a good laff.**

He found himself a girlfriend and a niche in the local scene playing hockey. It was like "a home from home", an odd phrase given the conflicts with his mother he told me about. His father was placid but she was fiery. Mark's brother had "ridden it out" until he went away and now Mark felt the heat. What was he doing? Where was he going? Why didn't he say? Was he doing enough work? When we met in January 1990, Mark said he was glad to be back in college after Christmas.

My mother was starting to get on top of me a bit. Just before I left I thought, can't wait to go, and I got in the car and thought, I'm going now. See you Mum! She was getting irate, perhaps because I was starting to slob around. Perhaps she thought it was

an indication of what I was like at college. It was generally about my room. Because I'm not there, I took my stuff and put it up in the attic. She looked at the place when it was empty, Great! She saw it with all the stuff in and thought it's a complete and utter mess! She kept going on and on about it. So I moved my stuff back into the attic in the end and she was all right. Then she goes, "Are you taking the dog for a walk?" It's actually my dog. It's only a year and a half old. Because I'm at college she's having to take it for walks. I think she resents it slightly.

In Computer Studies nothing seemed to work at first and he struggled with Outdoor Recreation. He said he had the information, but linking it all into an essay was really hard. Sometimes he was up until three doing his college assignments.

I seem to refuse to do any work in the library. I was sitting in there and I could hear the beat of the little machine with people taking books out. It kept on going. Generally **eleven onwards is a good time** to do it because it's nice and quiet and there's no distractions. I mean, **there's nothing else to do but your work.**

I write them over three nights. I get all my bits together because I've done a little spading work before, put them on one page and start: introduction, mark that off, carry on with the middle. I get to 500 or 600 words on the first night. On the second night I see how far I can get. I generally get to just before the conclusion, write the conclusion the next night and copy it all up.

Mark did not give college work priority but he had no doubt that being there was right for him.

What I want to do in life is work for a French company doing a bit of repping, representative sort of work. My brother is actually a rep in London and he said it's good. My father says it can be a fairly good life and you get a company car. Get my degree, majoring in French.

Mark failed the first year comprehensively and had to leave. For a while he was a fairly frequent visitor to Bedford.

The last time I saw him would be about June '91. He came to our house in a massive van with a siren on the top. He was selling things, machines for balloons. You put a toy inside them, like a teddy

bear in a big balloon if you see what I mean. He was a salesman selling these machines. It was quite funny because he was driving round the streets shouting things at people like, "This is your local Labour candidate." It was really funny. It was really funny. (Dan March 1992)

EMMA

(18: 18 points)

(French and History with Drama)

Emma did not qualify for the universities where she had applied but that did not seem to be a disappointment,

when it was coming up for results time, I was going off them. I went off Glasgow quite quickly. It was so far away and a big city and I was a bit worried about that. And then, with Warwick, there were things about the course. I looked into it a bit more and, I dunno, I wasn't too keen.

She had a polytechnic place, but turned that down. BCHE came to her attention after she had her results.

I was a late entrant. I hadn't heard of the course before. Had I heard of it I'd have applied. There were other courses, but I'm pleased I'm here.

Making new friends was the first hurdle.

I like to meet people, but I'm always a bit scared. It probably sounds a bit silly, but I sort of felt oh, I don't know anybody. I only know about three people: everybody else seems to know everybody else.

Her hostel was some distance from Polhill. The others there seemed to be friendly enough but they were from different years and courses and Emma felt out of things.

I live out. My friends are up here in college. When I've been on my own and stuff, I've thought I wish I was up with my friends because they were doing things and I wasn't. I felt a bit, well - perhaps they're getting on all right and they're not really bothered that I'm not there, just silly things really.

She told me about a time when they had said they would call to see her on their way back to Polhill from an evening out in town. She had waited up until one in the morning, but they did not come. A silly thing?

The course suited her. She loved Drama, was pleased with French and History was going better than she expected.

My lecturer came up and said, "Well done! You've done a good essay, you've got nothing to worry about." I was pleased. I was a bit worried about History because I didn't do it for A Level.

Had she ever felt let down by college?

Yes, we did have some work for Drama, which I felt wasn't properly prepared. Everyone's had problems with it, I mean it wasn't just me. We felt we were thrown in at the deep end. It was over the Christmas holidays. It was what they call a photoplay.

Her parents had helped with that. They listened and calmed her panic and then her father took her round to take the slides.

I asked whether college was very different from her girls' boarding school.

Yes, it is, because you have all these free afternoons and things. I mean, even when you had frees at school, you didn't have as much time, but there is a sense of - in the lectures and things - I've got quite a few lecturers and, I suppose quite rightly so, they're keen on everyone to turn up and kick up a fuss if they don't. I think some people were going by the idea that you don't have to go to all the lectures. You know, you just laze around.

This month the work had piled up. There was extra to do on top of assignments. It was January.

I said to myself, "Look, let's get your work done. That's the priority." So I stayed in the first fortnight. It was pretty awful because I like going out, but I made myself because I had to get my work done.

Three assignments were due?

Yes, and I got more work as well in the first week so as soon as I'd done a bit there was more to do. I felt I was sinking. It was awful. I'm about on a level and am slightly ahead now.

Emma had felt unsure of herself when she arrived, but

I felt better when I went home after my first term at college, more in control really. One or two things came up which I had to deal with, just a few

problems with the bank and things. Well, I just got on and dealt with them whereas before I'd have gone to my Dad and said, "What do I do?"

Holiday jobs were not easy to find and the cash from working nights in a pie packing factory had helped her to stay in credit. Managing her money was not easy but she felt that she was better off than her friends who were at work, typing numbers into a computer. Meeting friends over Christmas had been quite boring.

They're very nice and everything. I don't want to sound arrogant but I thought maybe I've done a bit more than them. Because I've been down here, I feel that maybe I haven't got as much in common as I did have.

Being at a desk all day did not appeal to her, although she said it might come to that in the end. There was no future for her in the village which was becoming more of a retirement place.

ANDREW

(18: 20 points)

(English, History and Drama)

At school Andrew had been advised to lower his sights and try for colleges of higher education. His success at A level surprised the staff, but he drew back from going to Liverpool University and came to Bedford. The broad course seemed attractive and he knew the town already.

Andrew had been interviewed for a college place the previous April. There were group sessions and individual talks with tutors. He said he found it easier to talk to people older than himself and was very happy with how he had coped. When he arrived to take up his place, it was a very different story.

I remember the day Dad brought me down here, the day that we started at college. I was looking forward to it a lot, coming to college, but the minute I got here, I tensed up.

I felt out of things those first two days. I felt a lot of things those first two days. Wondered whether I'd made the right decision. I just hid in my room. I felt like running down and ringing Dad up and saying come and get me! I could hear people in the corridor mucking about and I wanted to join in, but I just couldn't.

When we went to dos in the Freshers' Week like the Cider and Cheese, people spoke to me and I was thankful because otherwise I'd have just sat in the corner. I'd managed to come out of my room, I wasn't going to do any more.

After our scheduled conversation Andrew told me about two students who had been beaten up at a football match in London. He said he enjoyed going to matches himself. Being part of a football crowd was undemanding.

You don't have to get on with anybody to get on with anybody. You don't have to belong to belong.

Tower Block? I love it now. When I first got there, those first couple of days, I absolutely hated it because I thought it's like being in prison, stuck up here. I love it now, it's great. It's just the communal spirit we've got because everyone's trapped up there together.

I wouldn't call them friends really. I've got some good pals, mates.

I've got mates and I've got friends, friends I can talk to. I haven't got any friends here at the moment. My real friend is my girlfriend. I've known her for two years now. She's going to university. My friends have all gone away to university or college. I met up with them at Christmas, but I go home quite a lot at weekends too. I always give them a ring, find out who's there and I'm in contact with a lot of them by letter as well.

Andrew arrived on Tuesday, came out of his room on Thursday and went to a "big bash" the first weekend. He said he felt more comfortable with the people around him now and was enjoying the work. It was January 1990.

It used to freak me out thinking about lectures, sitting in a massive hall with a man standing miles away. It's not like that at all. Half our lectures are just lessons, exactly the same as they were in sixth form. Everyone sits round the desk and he talks and we take it down from him.

Drama has surpassed my expectations. I want to go into television or films and I thought it will help me with that. I thought it was going to be a lot of acting, which I wasn't looking forward to at all. We discuss texts and look at subtexts, but a lot of the time we're talking about the technical side of things. They'll give us a scene from a play and

we'll have to write down how we would direct it. It is hard work, but it's perfect for me.

It was Andrew's long-held ambition to go to cinema school and be a film director.

I work afternoons in the library and I go out after that unless I'm under pressure with assignments and then I work some nights as well. I've achieved a balance between going out and getting enough sleep and doing enough work.

The course in general suited him but some reservations were beginning to show.

Doing History at degree level is finding out things for yourself. With Roman Britain there's nothing to find out. You read a book and it's someone saying I think this, no solid fact or very little. With things I like doing, the 19th and 18th century, everything's written down. You get opinions, but there are facts and you know it's true.

It all seemed too much yesterday. It's not a case of too much as in there was too much work to do, it's too little. I was in my room and I'd got no work to do, nothing specific. It got to about half past one and I was just sitting there. I read a bit of Stephen King. It got to half past three and half past four. I'd been there for about three hours and I was so bored! I'd just been sitting there, looking out the window, then rolling on my bed. My friend came in and that perked me up, but most of the time I was moaning to him about how bored I was. It all seemed too much. I wanted to go home and see some of my real friends.

Was money a problem?

I'm absolutely fine at the moment. I worked out I have £34 a week to spend on what I want after I've paid for my rent, that includes the meals I have to cook. Saying that though, I don't know where half of it goes, the arcade game in the bar I expect.

GILL

(29: 0 points)

(English, Sociology and Drama)

We met for our first interview in March 1990. Thinking about a time when she felt unsure, she said:

That's run all the way through since I've actually got here, not necessarily unsure of college but of myself. Before I got here I was probably ignorantly competent, I felt more confident in myself then. **Coming into this environment has made me really feel quite unsure about all my other past knowledge, experience and everything.**

Gill started as a police cadet but, after a short time in the force, she decided it was not for her and became an air hostess. British Airways took over British Caledonian when Gill had served for six years and she accepted an offer of redundancy, which was the impetus to train as a dental nurse. Marriage brought her to this area where she practised. When she applied to BCHE she was doing a full-time BTEC in Health Studies, but a degree was her real ambition. She had expected to be asked to complete the BTEC first because she had no A Levels. When an offer came, she cut the BTEC short.

This is just so different. It's demanding so much more of me. That's what's probably leaving me feeling very underconfident and unsure, particularly in English. I have done no English and 99% have got A level, a background of how to look at poetry, how to look at novels. It takes time and practice to know what you're looking for, to be able to interpret. With something I've read before I've perhaps accepted and not questioned. **This critical thing, which is running through all the subjects.**

If the independence of mind she saw the course demanding was a shock, the college ethos was a pleasant surprise.

We were made to feel part of the college and **something that's really struck me is that the lecturers are on such a one-to-one basis. That helps to make you feel at home.** You're not totally in awe and daren't say anything and that's very important actually. You can approach most of the lecturers and say, "Look I'm stuck," or, "Will you help me with this?" and they usually say, "Let's have a cup of coffee." I've never been used to anything like that.

As the work built up, Gill was finding it very hard. It was not possible to keep college as a self-contained daytime activity. Free time during the day did not

always help. Being in the right frame of mind could not be guaranteed.

It's finding a balance between home life and the college thing. I take it all on board and I worry and panic and I'm not working efficiently. It's consuming so much of my time.

She rated herself as middle-of-the-road, not there to have fun but not as intense as some of them. She would nonetheless take hours over things, surrounding herself with books and making stacks of notes. Gill knew that this way of working stopped her from covering more ground but the time pressures were uppermost in her mind.

I've recently decided to alter my routine just to try and cram some more hours into the day. Now I try to get up an hour earlier, six instead of seven, and think, right, if I can get ready then I can perhaps scan through something that I haven't had time to read.

It's the pace of things. It's definitely quickened. Whereas in October they gave us work and I thought, yes, I've got time to do that, now it's finding the time: the work in between assignments, plus the looming thing of the exam, which absolutely makes me go cold at the thought of it.

She was having nightmares. Gill had faced having to take examinations before, but they were "just tests". Had she had doubts?

Oh, I've had them very intensely, financially as well, along with, I mean that's just a personal issue, but we have had problems and I've had to seriously consider whether I can carry on. And then, when the pressure's built up recently, that's, you know, just amplified that. **Have I made the right choice? Am I going to make myself ill worrying about the exams and the work?** So there have been times when I've actually thought no, I don't think I can carry on, but the want is still there. I don't feel that, in my heart, I want to give up. I still love it. **I still enthuse on it and I want to get there.**

I asked her about a time when college had really lived up to expectations and Gill could not pick out any one event. The whole experience was affecting her. She was being challenged and stretched and was changing.

People at home, my family, notice that I've actually - although I don't think I am, I'm learning through

it all the time. It's been brought into so many different other things in my life that people have actually noticed. My husband says that my use of language, particularly when it's written down, if it's about one of these subjects, how I actually write now is very changed. The whole broadening of my horizons, the whole scope of things, things that I would probably have never even thought about. Now it opens a door - that you think where does it ever end?

A lot of it's come from the mixture of counselling that I've had here and outside and college as well, which has made me see lots of things in a clearer light. You know, I can be more philosophical about it and accept that everyone's different, whereas I always sort of thought that everyone was, everything was rose-coloured.

MARTIN

(26: 0 points)

(English, History and Drama)

We met early in his third term, in May 1990. Martin had enrolled at an FE college as a favour to a girlfriend, somebody for her to go with. It was a turning point. His secondary modern boys' school was not remembered with any affection and he had been glad to leave to work on a small farm. His father, now in his seventies, worked there as well as gardener handyman. Mother had died. One brother was a roofer, the other was a lorry driver. One sister was married to a farm worker, the other worked in an old people's home. Martin said he came from a very working class background.

I sort of broke the mould; I went to evening classes. I loved it, really enjoyed it. For the first time I met a teacher, a lecturer, who would listen, who said you can do what you like and I'll mark it. I'd be working on the farm during the day, going to classes at night. I did English language and developed an enthusiasm as a writer. I wrote lots of short stories, plays, poems.

Martin tried being a postman, but still felt unsettled. His FE tutor had suggested colleges of higher education and he applied to about ten. BCHE offered him a place.

You could say I felt I was finally in charge of my life. I decided my own destiny in coming to college.

The moment I stepped into this place, I thought O my God! Have I done the right thing? Lots and lots of

younger people. There's a lot of attitudes in this place that I've left behind; "I'm away from home for the first time now. I can get drunk. Now I can do whatever I want. Now I can go after just about everything in a skirt" or whatever. It's like you're looking at yourself when you see people behaving in certain ways, because I've done stupid things, but I know now that they're not for me.

People were friendly: "We're all in the same boat. Where are you from? type of stuff," but living and working in a college was a strain.

I'm not a great socialiser. Socialising used to be for the evenings if you understand. You have to be on your best behaviour all day, meet different people, so many people to say Hello to. I'm feeling more at home now than I did.

His home situation was not ideal but it was somewhere he could relax, where he knew the expectations.

Home's been sold. My sister lives round the corner. My Dad's moved in with my sister and I have a piece of floor that is forever mine.

You think now I'm doing a degree, should I behave a bit differently? Should I come out with wonderful answers?

In fact he told me stories: how he contacted one college and must have spoken to the cleaners because they were so pleasant over the telephone; how he helped his brother's wife out with her Avon and sold perfume to "a dumpling in a hankie", who said, "It worked a treat with our Jack," and so on.

Right decision? I fluctuate. I love being on the farm, I love layering the hedges, I love putting drains in, I love helping cows give birth to calves and stuff like that.

I despair of people on the farm. I could see myself becoming like that. They have their own little world and they never really set foot outside.

I'm very lucky to be here, I know that. I'll get one shot at this. My Dad didn't. His Dad had him working down the mines and then he worked on a farm all his life.

That chair used to be a piece of tree at one time, you see the end product. It's not the same sweating and labouring over a piece of paper all day. It's

hard, but I expect it to be hard. You're not dealing with little levels, you're dealing with degree level here and so it should be hard.

Money was a problem, but a manageable problem.

We're given a grant which is barely enough to buy the bare essentials when you have to buy books. Books are expensive things, about £10 a copy.

Holiday jobs were vital to making ends meet, but Martin was on familiar territory there:

Straw carting with my cousin, a coal round, I decorated my brother's front kitchen, I put a fence up and did some gardening for a guy my Dad knows, just odd jobbing really.

The only time I've felt excessively pissed off was when I did an English assignment in January, a timed assignment. I suffer from my nerves. We were moved to another room and I just grabbed the question paper. It had three sonnets and you were supposed to choose one and explain how writers convey and reinforce meaning. I did all three.

I've passed everything that they've given me. The first three assignments just about got through. The next crop were better. The last crop I thought were really good.

Changing the routine? Preparing! I look exactly at what the question wants in the assignment. I make lists on pieces of paper. If they'd mentioned 'religion' in it, I'll have a page of religious ideas. Before, it would be just look at a book, jot down a few notes and bang it all out on one piece of paper.

It was Maggie (the college counsellor) who said do this preparation business. She makes me feel a lot better about myself. She's very good.

Martin told me his greatest support was his girlfriend, Sarah, a younger student. They began a relationship after working together on a project.

He had "broken the mould", but he had no definite career plans. Martin would just see what happened.

PAM

(42: 14 points)

(History and Geography with Romanticism and Realism)

Pam's first job was as secretary to a professor who reviewed philosophy books. At slack times, she read them herself. Years later she had started Philosophy A Level, doing two afternoons a week. A change of job meant she had to abandon that, but the idea of studying stayed with her.

I picked up this leaflet for the National Extension College. My son was doing 0 levels so I thought it will give me an interest. Economics, I don't know why I chose that really. Well, I picked out the ones I couldn't do like the Physics. You send for a sample and I thought I might be able to manage that.

By the time her son was applying for a higher education place, Pam had two A levels.

You know, you send your little cards off to apply for your prospectuses. I did those for my son and put mine in as well. I was sort of on the move then wasn't I?

The local college was the obvious choice. She knew people who had graduated there and had an idea of the work involved. There were surprises. It was unnerving to hear marks compared over coffee. Correspondence course grades had been just for her and good or bad essays did not affect the results, there was a written examination for that. She said that continuous assessment made her extra cautious.

I try to organise myself as I did when I was doing the A Levels. I'm here all day Monday, then Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday mornings. I do most of my work in the afternoon. Sometimes I don't feel like it and go and do my shopping. I try to get my assignments going early so if I have a day when I don't want to work, I don't have to do it. I have a long afternoon, from about two to five or half past five. At night I'm not functioning as well.

I had a low point after Christmas. Things started speeding up. You've got assignment dates for early in the new year and you're trying to read the books and things to start the term, with Christmas in the middle. I'm better off than a lot of people. I've just got one son of eighteen and he's quite capable of looking after himself. And I had problems at home - my husband's company has actually gone into receivership. And I had a particularly low mark on

something in R & R, the French literature side. I hadn't done literature of any sort: **analysing, that's something I'm not used to doing.** It was a shock, because I thought I'd done what I was supposed to be doing. Nevertheless I'd never seen a sample of what I was supposed to be doing so I hadn't got a goal in mind.

One I felt pleased with was on the R and R, for the art history. When it came back it was much better than I'd expected, because I felt when I was writing it that I really didn't understand it. It didn't appear like that to someone else. It was one about William Blake. All I'd really done was reassessed facts, looked through various books and got various bits of information. I hadn't put any personal interpretation into it because I hadn't understood it well enough to do that.

I felt I'd missed out on that area. (Romanticism and Realism) I can be in places where there's a good art gallery and there's not much point going in if you haven't decided what you're looking for. I felt this was a good way of getting a good cross-section, literature and art. **I feel it's doing me good. All of it is interesting. We've done the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery and we're doing the Victoria and Albert.**

Geography was different from what she remembered at school and took some getting used to. History held no surprises, but it was not easy.

Yes, what I expected, but the fact that - I mean you have an idea of your ideal essay. Nobody's fault but mine. In some ways it's harder doing it through a correspondence course, you haven't got anyone to talk to. On the other hand, you were almost spoon-fed because you go from the beginning of the book to the end of the book and when you've finished it, you've finished it.

Pam told me that her marks had ranged from 44% to 65%. She saw herself as 55%, about average.

I'm never going to make the brilliant marks, not going to be that good a student. It's memory things I'm going for.

Her husband's redundancy had unsettled her for a while.

For a while I had a limbo feeling. My husband's sorted out another job now, but it did put a question mark over the course for a time. Whereas I

started doing the degree for the sake of doing the degree, it starts to prompt you to think what are you doing with it and where are you going?

JASON

(24: 22 points)

(Ecology, Outdoor Recreation and Drama)

Jason's parents had divorced when he was two and he stayed with his mother who had not remarried. Father lived near enough to keep in touch. Jason did well at A level and won a place at Imperial College. He left after the first year.

When you're in a place like that, you've got a weight, loads, years of institutionalisation. I knew when I was swotting for the exams that it wasn't for me. I still swotted and I passed, but I left. As soon as the break came that was it, I knew I wasn't going back.

We met in March 1990. He came to my room late exuding an air of confidence. Jason had lived on a Thames houseboat after Imperial, worked as a messenger in London and joined a theatre group. He had tried unsuccessfully for a place on a full time violin making course. When he was offered the chance to study clarinet making, he said he "bottled out". BCHE offered what seemed to be a good combination of subjects and the town was near enough to London. Jason told me that he "breezed through" the interview. Before he came to college he tried to start a business through the Prince's Trust and the Enterprise Scheme, offering cycling adventure weekends. He failed.

They just turned me down, said it was too much for one person. Originally I'd been doing it with my best friend, but, as soon as it came down to the nitty gritty of actually applying for things, he backed out. It was all right sitting in a pub talking about it. I was doubting the college decision. If I'd got the grant and everything, I wouldn't have been here now.

Jason did not book a room in hall and blamed college for not finding him one when he arrived.

That first night I didn't have anywhere to sleep. I was absolutely positive that there would be places because people drop out at the last minute. I had to sleep in the park. I felt they'd just shrugged their shoulders.

Jason had found a place in a shared house in town. He was not receiving housing benefit: they were saying that he "had not sent them things"! Although he had wanted a room in college, it was not the centre of his life.

I work Mondays despatching in London, push-bike. My girlfriend lives in Nottingham. I've been seeing her now for five years. **She's part of my life and very much more important to me than college is, as in a way all my friends are.** So it's a matter of fitting everything in with the four days I actually have in college. The number of assignments is quite a lot. **I can't give up the other sides of my life.**

His particular friends were two fellow students. In his eyes they were the best part of college. After Christmas they had moved into the house with him.

These two brothers that I talked to you about, they're very, very literary. They've read loads and know about a lot of things, have literary style. I feel out on a limb sometimes from their conversations, inferior.

The rugby lads on the other hand were "caricatures of themselves, very cliched," and Jason said he despaired of the 'good' young BEs who would be going straight back to school as teachers.

I despair of the whole thing in a way, coming straight from school, having lived very sheltered lives. Their families have never had any money problems. They've just sailed through and they've always had friends. They do regular things and they have very set moral patterns and standard patterns in the way they do things.

He told me a story about taunting a quiet girl into throwing a forkful of rice.

There were three of us, deliberately gone over to the table where she and her friend were sitting to stir them up a bit, just because they're so closed and naive. We just wanted them to show some emotion. We wanted to see the real selves of them. I'm sure there is something behind **those huge barricades, facades that people put up.**

Jason had his own facade and often felt unsure himself. He told me how nervous he had been at his first Drama practicals, despite having worked with a theatre group.

In the theatre group you were supported. It was like being in a family and, when it's like that, you can

put anything on to anyone really, you feel very confident.

Did he feel very exposed when he arrived?

That's it, you are! Because you've had like five minutes' chat with people that you've only just met that week and then you have to perform before people that you don't know either and you feel very much on your own.

People would describe me as an extravert but I wouldn't because I feel incredibly unsure in social circles. I'm very very bad, very very nervous and don't know what to say type of thing. And I like hiding in my room. I spend quite a lot of time hiding in my room.

The One to One Thing. I mean I couldn't walk into the bar, even if there were people that I knew, I couldn't just walk in and start chatting. I'd have to walk in with people that I knew already and gradually introduce myself.

One of his friends left and the other dropped back a year to major in Drama. He was to leave later for a job in theatre. Jason transferred to a polytechnic where he could major in Drama and be nearer his girlfriend.

CHAPTER SIX

FEELING UNSURE AND EXPOSED

The point of asking for stories was to contextualise the interviews, root them in experiences and enable feelings to be expressed. (Nias 1991) The conversations took different paths as anticipated and brought out sub-plots and possible cul-de-sacs. Data arose that related, for example, to the role of Mother: to dominance, conflict, absence, being a mother. If those data were particularly striking and affected the students' decisions to come and their careers while they were at college, they were included in the case studies. They were not intended to open up separate avenues. The purpose was a picture of the subjects' experiences while they were students.

The first critical incident schedule was informed by three middle range concepts: **deciding** to come to college, the **break** with the past, and finding a satisfactory **routine**. I shall return to those concepts later. First, I take a more general look at the data.

Subjects were not asked to respond to every item, only to those which "rang a bell" with them. (see p51) It is worth reiterating that items on the critical incident schedules were not there to yield rows of stories for later listing, categorising and counting, and that any impression of a measured technique with circumscribed outcomes would be false. It was an untidy approach to data collection. Individual subjects told similar and sometimes the same stories in response to different items on the schedule, and they collectively told different sorts of stories in response to the same items. Something they had in common, however, was a lack of confidence, a feeling of **insecurity**. As Mark put it, "we were all in the same boat, totally unsure about the place." For Nicola, Emma, Andrew, Martin and Jason, much of their insecurity was related to meeting new people, to the strain of what I have called 'social exposure'.

I knew that coming to college could be stressful for the students even in a small and supportive place like BCHE, but I had not realised how stressful. Perhaps that was because of "those huge barricades, facades that people put up". Jason, who used that phrase to describe others, had put up his own facade, exuding confidence when we first met. One of the strengths of the critical incident technique is how it can penetrate facades through the use of ordinary language and stories. (French 1989) Over half an hour into the interview, Jason was telling me that he often felt very much on his own.

People would describe me as an extravert but I wouldn't because I feel incredibly unsure in social circles. I'm very, very bad, very very nervous and don't know what to say type of thing.

Jason said he liked hiding in his room. He spent quite a lot of time there. It was undemanding. He could avoid what he called "The One to One Thing" of having to make conversation on an individual basis, particularly with someone of his own age and standing. Somewhat similarly, after his first interview was over, Andrew told me that he liked being in a football crowd, where "you don't have to get on with anybody to get on with anybody". It was a graphic remark. Andrew had hidden in his room for the first two days he was at college. It was picturing him there, stranded in his room, that suggested the metaphor of the ledge.

I could hear people in the corridor mucking about and I wanted to join in, but I just couldn't.

Nicola, on the other hand, although it has to be said that she was in a more favourable setting in her small hostel, did not avoid meeting people but responded positively. She made herself go out of her room and into the hostel kitchen, a communal place, even though she felt awkward, on the outside of the conversation there.

I felt I can't go back to my room and sit on my own because I'd never get to know anyone that way.

Emma was frightened in social situations. Telling me was at the cost of some embarrassment. It was "silly".

I like to meet people, but I'm always a bit scared. It probably sounds a bit silly.

Martin was "not a great socialiser" and also he wondered whether he was expected to "behave a bit differently" as an undergraduate. Pam enjoyed the company at college, but only up to a point. The constant comparing of grades among the matures was a surprise and became increasingly irritating as later interviews were to reveal. Gill too felt exposed. She doubted her own ability to cope. Her confidence was undermined as her previous knowledge and experience were challenged by what she called "this critical thing, running through all the subjects". For Martin, Gill and Pam in particular, their feelings of exposure were caught up with their academic fears.

Martin and Gill both came with little formal academic background. Both grasped the opportunity the college had given them. Martin knew he was "very lucky to be here" and "expected it to be hard". He worried about his new

situation but responded positively, actively. In a later interview he called doing the course "a job of work". Gill "loved it and enthused on it" and "took it all on board", to the extent that it caused her to "worry and panic", knowing that she was "not working efficiently". Gill and Martin worried but they were determined to succeed. Both sought help from the counsellor. Gill was surprised to find that she could approach most of her tutors on an individual basis and discuss her work over coffee. Pam was more passive and negative. She was comparatively well qualified with two A levels but, at our first interview, said she was "not going to be that good a student". Study would "give her an interest". The course would "do her good".

Pam talked as though she expected the course to work on her, Gill and Martin by contrast worked at the course. Ideas of passivity and activity highlighted the contrast between **being in control and being led** and between **facing a challenge or avoiding it**. Nicola faced up to social exposure by making herself meet people, Andrew hid in his room. Similarly, when she was faced with the new challenge of the photoplay, Nicola sought the help of other students and talked it through with them. Martin and Gill, with no A Level experience, were both particularly worried about academic demands but both took steps to overcome their worries by going to see the counsellor.

Martin and Gill had a determination to succeed. The course was at the centre of their lives. Jason, on the other hand, said that his friends, his girlfriend in particular, were "very much more important" to him than college was. College was at the margins for Jason, who couldn't give up the other sides of his life. Mark's 'avowed' ambition was to major in French and get his degree, but the life he 'espoused' (Argyris and Schon 1974) in the stories he told me, did not bear that out. In reality, the course was at the margins for him too. His circle of friends gave him the "good laff" he sought and work was relegated to when there was "nothing else to do". For Emma, Andrew and Nicola, the course was not at the margins, neither was it all-consuming. Having a social life and keeping up with the work were both important. However, when the course demands grew and Emma began to feel as if she was "sinking", she told herself, "Look, let's get your work done. That's the **priority.**"

Nicola did a little work each day so that she could go out in the evenings with an easy mind. Andrew "achieved a **balance** between going out and getting enough sleep and doing enough work." For Gill finding "a balance between home life and the college thing" was a problem, although

the problem was really that of finding as much time as she felt she ought to devote to college. There was no doubt where her priority lay.

'Priority' and 'balance', whether the course was at the centre or at the margins of an informant's life, were useful organizing ideas in drawing up ensuing critical incident schedules. Such perspectives are not given much attention in the literature of HE; studies of students tend to concentrate on academic learning. However, while it is salutary to know that 'surface' or 'atomistic' approaches to academic work (Marton et al 1984) are commonplace among students, and that clues as to what will earn good marks are rated more highly than the keys to understanding (Becker et al 1968), in such studies, the course is assumed to be at the centre of students' lives, which may not always be so:

researchers and higher education institutions have taken little interest in the 'other' segments of students' experience which occupy a significant proportion of their lives. (Haselgrove 1994 p4)

It is not just the proportion of time that these other experiences take up that matters however, it is their relative significance to the students, ie what these other segments mean to them. 'Priority' and 'balance', what is at the centre and what is at the margins of a student's concerns, offer a more subtle account than the compartmentalisation of experience implied in the above quotation. It is not simply what students can be seen to be doing that captures their experience, but what they are thinking while they are doing it, including what they think they ought to be doing or would prefer to be doing instead.

The fact that there are experiences more significant to some students than marks or academic knowledge should be neither ignored nor made light of. Those experiences can impinge on traditional measures of academic success and, perhaps more importantly, make their own contributions to growth.

The first schedule had been informed by three concepts: the decision to come to college, the break with the past, and finding a routine. Informants' decisions to come into HE and to BCHE covered a range of properties and dimensions. (Strauss 1987, Strauss and Corbin 1990) Decisions were taken early and in a considered way, as by Andrew, or, as for Mark, by someone else and as a last resort. With Andrew, as with Emma, there was an element of playing safe in choosing a small college in a small town. Decisions were last minute or the outcome of a long period of incubation as was the case with Martin.

BCHE was the only college open to him, as it was for Gill. Both felt very lucky to be accepted; privileged. Getting a place could be something to take pride in or it could mark shattered ambitions as it did for Nicola. Decisions could be firm, as Andrew's was initially, or wavering, as Jason's was. Had Jason's business venture succeeded, he would not have come to college at all. The permutations were varied and could be relevant when looking back over a student's career, but they suggested little in the way of items for the next stage.

The break with the past that was involved in becoming a student also showed some interesting contrasts. Here were eight individuals in different situations. Pam and Gill, the local mature students, were living at home, but there was more of a sense of continuity for Pam as people at home noticed that Gill was changing in taking a new independence on board. Martin was in a different world but kept a strong sense of identity with his past. Jason never physically left his former life. Andrew often went home at weekends to see his "real friends". Mark was relieved to be away from his mother. Nicola had strong ties with her family but had "made that break" to the extent that she went home only for half terms and holidays. When Emma went home for Christmas, she felt "more in control". There were differences in the degrees of change that the **transition** to student life brought to individuals.

The **routines** which the student subjects adopted and those they thought they ought to adopt appeared to offer most promise for further exploration at this stage: how informants balanced college work and social life or reconciled the demands of home and college; how they coped with marks, assignments and more general study; what their priorities were; their attitudes to knowledge and to assignments; the place of friends and reference groups; whether informants felt in control and whether they were active or passive in their response to new challenges: these were what interested me for the next schedule.

However diverse their backgrounds, the students I had begun to know were all in new spaces: a social space offering anonymity or friendship; a personal space freed from parental superego or domestic expectations; and the official space of tutors, academic tasks, knowledge and marks. By giving that official space an explicit focus in the next schedule, I could test the priority that these students gave to it. Some evidence of their attitudes to assignments and to knowledge had been given in response to the first schedule; in, for example, Pam's unease at hearing marks compared over coffee, in her worries about continuous assessment, which made her

even more cautious; in Andrew's reference to "solid facts" and in Gill's talk of "this critical thing". In the second interview, I wanted items to encourage the students to give me further insights into how they saw the course, marks, knowledge and tutoring. I wanted to know more about their priorities, values and attitudes and about what lay behind the routines they actually adopted and those they would like to adopt.

Typically for the technique, the second schedule was built around contrasts, the most important informing concept being 'priorities'. The first two items asked subjects to tell me about the time they most enjoyed and their worst moment since we had last met. These were a standard open-ended pair of items intended to encourage subjects to talk about things of importance to them.

Items 3 and 4 were much more unusual and built on ideas I had used with teacher trainees to get an understanding of their models of successful practice. (French 1992) In this inquiry, the students' priorities were to be tested through their ideas of success and failure as they were given a living focus in projective questions about other students. They were asked to tell me, without naming any names, about a student who was getting the most out of college and another who was not making a success of it.

Following the earlier observation about giving the "official space" of tutors and tests an explicit focus, the third and fourth pairs of items asked subjects to tell me about their most rewarding and disappointing assignments, and, anonymously, about the tutors they most appreciated and those they did not. This was designed to give an insight into their **attitudes to marks and knowledge**.

A final item was added inviting the eight subjects to put a mirror up to their lives as students. What would they include in a photograph to remember those lives by? Like the first pair of items about good and bad times, it was an attempt to enable them to articulate what was most important to them. (Becker 1981)

The complete schedule is given on the next page.

SECOND INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: YEAR TWO 1990/1991

Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed again. It will be much as before, except that this time there are fewer items. The list of prompts is there to help you focus your thoughts before we meet. I am interested in your experiences since the first interview.

What you recall will provide the framework for our conversation. Try to remember as much as you can: it might help if you start by pinpointing when particular events, episodes and encounters took place and then go on to fill in the details about the place and the context. This time round I am including questions about people who have made an impression on you, but, as I stressed before, you are not expected to give names.

I look forward to seeing you again when I hope you will be prepared to tell me about:

- 1 The time you enjoyed most since our last meeting
- 2 Your worst moment since then
- 3 A student who seems to you to be getting the most out of college
- 4 A student who isn't making a success of it here
- 5 Your most disappointing assignment
- 6 Your most rewarding assignment
- 7 A tutor you would rather not have
- 8 Your best tutor

Finally, a different sort of question.

If you could take just one photograph to express your life as a student, what would be in it?

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SECOND YEAR INTERVIEWS: 1

NICOLA

(6 A Level points)

In November 1990 we met for the second interview. Nicola had been in France over the summer holiday, working as a chamber maid. Her sister had worked in the same hotel the year before. Nicola made her own arrangements and went alone. She was still living in Caves Lane. Her friends were renting house place nearby. Since our last meeting, she said she had most enjoyed

coming back in the second year and meeting the friends from the first year and feeling really confident, feeling, Yes they're still here. We didn't get in touch through the summer. I was away in France. But coming back, I felt so at home. When I went to visit them in George Street, they were saying, "You're welcome to come round any time." They're true friends, eager to hear what I'd been doing and I could hear what they'd been doing; makes you feel really good.

Asked about her worst time, Nicola told me about an assignment that had gone wrong. Work for her three subjects was all due the same week and she had left herself only one week to do it. It was an essay on techniques of cinema.

I repeat myself and I feel the assignment's rather childish. I'm dreading having it back, but I think at least hopefully it'll teach me a lesson. I'll take more time next time, space my time out.

How did she go about writing essays?

I think about the question itself before I even look at any articles or any books. Obviously you've got to understand the question right from the beginning.

I'm a slow reader. I look at every single word. A lot of people just skim over and they look at the major words of the sentences. I think that's better; especially when you're reading for a course like this. You've got to learn not to look in so much detail.

Note-taking? I'm terrible, a complete time-waster. I'll write out the important paragraphs. I'll write word for word what they've written. It's so time-wasting, but I worry about the way I express myself.

If I write down what they've put, it sounds good and then I can interpret it in my own way. When I'm actually writing out the assignment, I can cross it out but still have the basic idea there. I can have what they say rather than having the books. It's good because I learn expressions as well. I get my notes and mark 1 2 3. I'll base my assignment on my notes, place them in a certain order, and write it out in rough first.

When I asked about her most rewarding assignment, marks were uppermost in her mind.

I had a 65% once, twice! I had one for French and one for English. I was really pleased. It was fantastic, couldn't believe it when I got those back. I'd spent a lot of time, put a lot of effort in. You feel great satisfaction. **But I suppose rewarding as in feeling I'd achieved something, again that drama photoplay.**

I see all the mature students getting a lot higher marks and think oh gosh, I wish I could do that!

It was sad but true that most students were "sinners" in being more keen on clues as to what would come up in an exam or in pointers to help with an assignment than they were in learning in a wider sense. Her image of success, however, was not that of a high flier in terms of marks or industry. Those who could manage the course, could enjoy themselves and get involved in college activities were getting the most out of it.

People that fall down are people that just look at the assignments or just look at the Union or just look at enjoying themselves. There's got to be some stage in between where you are enjoying yourself and working hard.

A snapshot of me as a student? Oh dear - should be in the library working away! I dunno. Again I'd say some sort of - both I suppose - sat in my room with the books behind me, my friends there as well, there'd be about six, some BEd. They were in Caves Lane last year.

DAN (replaced Mark)
(19 yrs at entry: 8 points)
(English and History with Computer Studies)

Registry put me in touch with Dan. He had lived on site at Polhill for the first year. In February 1991 when we met, he was sharing a house on the other side of town.

He said he missed Polhill. His worst time was an evening the previous November when he had felt particularly low. He was alone in the house.

I was comparing the first year to the second year, thinking every night was different and we had a good laff and so on. I was at my lowest ebb. I really thought well, if I left college tomorrow I wouldn't mind. **It wasn't the course, it was the social thing.** I was expecting after the summer to come back and everything would be the same. I'm close to the people I'm living with but other friends I used to have on site have gone their separate ways. You go to see someone but it's a long walk and you've got a purpose for going so it's all a bit more artificial. Last year you could just pop round.

When he first arrived at college, he was the only first year on his staircase and he said he was very lonely until he started going around with friends he had met in lectures. Then the good times began. Friends took pride of place in Dan's snapshot of college life. The best time were the parties they had in each others' rooms around the blocks at Polhill. He told me about the party that had "got it all going".

This party was actually in my room because I had a double room you see and I was in there by myself. A group of us, actually the group of lads I'm living with, we all decided to get a few cans in and just sit around with a bit of music on and we just sort of sat in a circle talking to each other and I liked that because I got to know people. I really liked that because **I find it difficult to start talking to people just in a bar or something.** Everyone was just sat round in a circle, the conversation was flowing easily and everyone was just relaxed.

Now that Dan was living in a shared house with other students, the problem was different.

I'd like to be able to push myself to do more work at nights. I find sometimes when we're all just sat there talking, **it's difficult to sort of leave, leave the group, go upstairs and work.** It is difficult.

Dan's idea of a successful student was one of the group, a BEd student, who shared the house.

He's really good socially and at the same time, within five minutes, he can go, "Right, I'm off upstairs to do some work."

On the other hand:

There's one person, I suppose that's his business really - it's just my opinion, I think he should go to more lectures. I can't remember the last time I saw him in a lecture actually.

It was hard to get down to work.

Setting a time every night specifically to work, I wish I could do that. I find it very difficult.

I have to psyche myself up a couple of days to get myself into doing an essay. The idea of assignments meeting deadlines, that's helped me. It has, because I was always one for dallying about. When you had to do an essay at school for A level, you could say, "Sir I've forgotten the essay" and stuff, but now you've got to have it in on the day. I like that, because you become more responsible. You realise that it costs you not to do it for the deadline.

Getting 90% for linear programming had been Dan's best piece. Quite a lot of work had gone into it. He had put most effort into an English assignment, writing a short story, but that had turned out to be very disappointing.

I thought I like the sound of that so I started the night we got it. I did it over the two months we had to do it. I did it how an assignment should be done, gradually, not rush job all one night. I thought I'd written a good story but I got a disappointing mark, just scraped 42%. I wasn't happy about it so I told him and he went through it again. I think it was all personal opinion really. He didn't like it, I thought it was good. It was about a bloke going mad. He'd got caught in a routine of life.

Dan was managing financially. Summer holiday work and a part-time job during the term were helping to keep his overdraft under control.

EMMA

(18 A Level points)

Emma had moved into Polhill for the final term of her first year. She wanted to stay on there but it was not possible. By December 1990 when we met again, she was sharing a rented house at the other end of town, near the Lansdowne site. In her snapshot of college life, Emma said she would be "messing around" with her friends on the lawns there. She admired popular people.

There's different ideas of success. You can think of the academic, but there are also people who are a success because everybody likes them. Their work is all right but they contribute a lot as well. There's this lady that everybody likes, a mature.

"This lady" had a busy family life but could always find time for other students and was fun to be with. Emma and her friends had spent one or two good evenings at her house. She was contrasted with someone who "scurried away" straight after lectures, a shy person. Emma was shy herself. Martin told me in passing a year or so later that she was "a bit reclusive". Talking about the worst moments since our last conversation, Emma said:

I had a bit of social life at the beginning, came back for Freshers' Week, got involved in that. Then suddenly the work started to mount up as well as having the play. I was really involved in the play and just working and so at some points it was quite a miserable existence.

There was no doubt in Emma's mind that her best time had been taking part in the performances of 'Serious Money' the week before we met. The play had been put on in the community theatre, which was almost full on both nights. Emma enjoyed the greasepaint and the applause and having friends and family there to support her.

Her most rewarding assignment was putting together a piece from Pinter with two others. They performed it to the group and explained their interpretation. The three of them were given marks in the sixties:

we all got on together and were very committed. We put quite a lot of time in. We spent a lot of time just really getting the lines right, because, with Pinter, I mean you can just dig up so many different meanings.

The photoplay that she had worried about had earned good marks and Emma was now looking forward to making a film. Her biggest disappointment was in French, where her marks were only in the middle fifties. There was so much red ink on her assignments and it was daunting having to get up in front of others and speaking in French.

I haven't quite got to grips with it or haven't had time to go over it so I'm still making mistakes. If you can get to grips with your grammar and you have, you know, vocabulary, good vocabulary, then you're well on your way. I'd like to get that smoothed over for my year in France. I am majoring in it and I sometimes feel it might let me down a bit.

It's really the oral because you can spend some time on the written, perfect it and go over things, but with the oral, you've just got to think there and then. I'm a bit self-conscious as well, which doesn't help.

There were other hazards in company for Emma. She said you could lose hours over coffee listening to other people's problems. Emma tried to work in her own room and to use the library between lectures. History essays had, "touch wood", been all right so far, but it was difficult to organise her time.

There have been times when I've had to rush them. That was really lack of planning, particularly in the first year. I did have time then. This year it's been a bit of a problem, I've had the play. I get fed up with time-tables because I find it hard to keep to them, so I sort of have a rough guideline in my mind.

I just sort of get the notes, a lot of time spent reading books. I normally find with me, I'm getting a bit better, but I like to get everything down you know from the book, which means I rewrite the book sometimes. I've got to stop myself and think, you haven't got time to do this you know; just get the bits you need.

A helpful device was the spidergram, an idea she had picked up on a voluntary study aid course in the first year. She used a spidergram as she read more often now. It gave a sense of purpose and showed how things linked.

Emma would ideally like to get a 2.1. She was thinking about possible careers in the theatre. In the immediate future she would be going home and working as a waitress to subsidise her grant.

ANDREW

(20 A Level points)

I met Andrew again in January 1991. His grandfather, who was very important to him, had died and his mother had been suffering from depression. For a fortnight before Christmas Andrew had not been to college so that he could stay with her during the day. He had moved out of Polhill and was sharing a house in Spenser Road.

He said that last year everyone was looking for someone to be with. When I talked with him then, he had told me that his real friends were at home. Now he told me his

"friends" were in Bedford and that he had not got much to say to "mates" at home. There had been a break with his girlfriend too and he had found someone else in college, a BEd student. It was "nothing serious". The best times had been when he was with his friends.

So many things that we've done, me and my friends, that have been really good fun, just mucking about: birthday, Christmas parties, that sort of thing, just generally getting very boisterous and very drunk, lots of parties. Last year there was one; my friend Ivan had a birthday and we all got blind drunk. It seems like childish humour, but at the time it was so funny. Ivan stripped himself naked and ran round the quad at night. That was last February. And then we had a party at our house before Christmas, which was great, a good laugh throughout, finished at six in the morning. The people I live with are getting a lot, not just out of college, but out of college life.

The person who was getting the most out of college was someone who joined the course late and was at first very shy. Now he had "come out of his shell" and was "really enjoying himself" with the others in the house. It later became clear that Andrew was talking about Ivan. It was also to become clear later that, when he was describing someone who was not making a success of college, Andrew was telling me about Dan, the "dolite", so named because he was staying in bed too long and missing practically all the lectures.

There were eight young men living together, six BAs and two BEds. At weekends Andrew used to go home very often. Now he said he was having a much better time in Bedford.

Photo? Me and my friends! I don't know what we'd be doing, Leonardo's probably, have to be in a pub because that's where we spend most of our waking hours.

If he was happy with his friends, his enthusiasm for the course had taken a downward turn. He had done minimal revision for the first year examinations and had passed with marks in the mid fifties.

I'm getting a bit disillusioned with it because, I can't think of any phrase other than the one that we use in the house, which is that it's such a Mickey Mouse course. It's like nothing's done properly. Nothing's looked into. We have to cover so much ground in so little time, so much is done on the surface. It's laughable the way we do things.

In History they were covering a century a term and, in English, a novel in two weeks, things Andrew thought you would spend a year on at university.

Most rewarding assignment? I'm doing it at the moment, we have to make a film, five to ten minutes long. I've got a camera from the 1st of February. At the moment I'm putting together a story board. I'm doing a silent film in black and white. I'm having the catch phrases on screen, using the genre of the old detective looking for something. What it is is a switch. He puts it on and the colour and sound come on. It's for handing in in May.

His enthusiasm for film studies in Drama had not waned, even though it was in that area that he had had his greatest disappointment and irritation.

We had a film assignment and I did a mammoth thing, about twelve sides long, and I was dead pleased with it. We've got a new tutor, I don't know whether she's not marking them right or what. A lot of us have been getting low marks and she gave me 36%. I really enjoyed doing the research, it was about dominant cinema and how it draws the audience in to the narrative of the film.

Andrew questioned the fail grade for his essay on dominant cinema and the tutor remarked it at 41%, just a pass. He felt it was worth much more but did not take it further. It would cause hassle and they would only close ranks. He had problems with this tutor anyway.

One thing I can't stand about lecturers, especially at this level, is if what they say they believe is right. It happens every lecture with her. Whatever is said is like the Gospel and if you question it, you're frowned upon. A lot of the time we watch films so it's not so bad, but when the actual lecture takes place, it's awful. Your opinions don't matter very much. It's either her opinion or noone's opinion. She's very much into feminism and a lot of our lectures are based round that: women in cinema, women in this, women in that and it gets a bit too much sometimes. I want to say look, just do men in something!

In contrast a "brilliant" History tutor gave the facts and presented opposing arguments.

I asked Andrew how he went about his essays.

I gather all my facts, choose the argument I'm going to write for, do it in rough and then write it up. I read a few books, reread them, write down all the paragraphs and pages, facts, dates. As I'm doing it, it sort of forges in my mind. Obviously one book has one argument, another book has another argument, and you have to try and put them both in. It depends on what the question is asking for really.

Coping with the course was no problem in Andrew's eyes. If anything, it was not demanding enough. I asked about coping financially. Did he have a part-time job?

No, I'm looking. I need a job desperately. When I finished last term I was £300 overdrawn and this term I'm heading for it. I've only just got enough money in the bank now to cover my rent with about £50 to spare.

GILL

(Mature: No A Level points)

We met in December 1990. The items on the interview schedule were different but her main themes were the same as in March: determination to succeed, the support at college and how she was growing. Gill's home life was more unsettled. Money was a problem. Their house was up for sale and they were renting a place. But Gill seemed more settled in herself and had stopped seeing the counsellor. Her best moments had been the relief after the examinations and finding that she had done well in all three subjects. She had concentrated on some areas and skimmed others. For Sociology she had put her energies into the theories of Marx and Durkheim.

I tend to steer away from gender, feminism, that kind of thing, I'm more into theories. I just find it easier actually. I seem to be able to work it through in my mind.

With that hesitancy went a will to resist any ceiling on her attainment. She told me about an English assignment that had been graded at 63%.

A good mark and I'm happy with it but I want to know, well, how could I have got more? I seemed to put everything into it. If that's the best that I could do, I wasn't happy enough. All my energies and everything went into it.

A part-time job in a craft shop added to the pressure.

I use quite a lot of Sundays, the whole day, because I'm working Friday and Saturday and I'm in college the rest of the week. Evening times I try to do something, but it's not every night at a certain time I'll sit down. You're sort of juggling other things as well, particularly at the moment with how things have been.

Recently she had changed how she went about her work. Her husband had suggested that if she wrote notes on one side of the paper it would make it easier to sort them.

I tend to do a coding system now, which I never did before. He was quite amazed that I had thought this process through. I do my spidergram, my central topics, what I want to talk about. I start at the top with my introduction, what I want to include in there, just key words, and then I'll do various bits of it. I'll label them, A B C or A1 A2, and then go back to the notes, sectioning them all out.

In an essay on dominant cinema she had used 'profit' and 'ideology' as key words. The spidergram was an idea she had picked up from another student. It took time but

you have some kind of control. Otherwise, it's pages of notes and you can't demuddle them so you have to formulate some kind of indexing.

Photograph? Well I know where it would be. It would be in the corner of the canteen, we seem to dominate that corner, with cups of the canteen coffees and all the group around and lots of chatting and that kind of thing.

Gill said her group of friends were the ones who were getting the most out of college.

The whole thing of being at college, how much it has meant and is meaning to them, They are growing and learning from it.

They were largely mature day students. They discussed the work, shared books and helped each other out.

It's very important indeed, to have that support. This sort of being able to bounce off each other. Sometimes you don't feel so hot or so good about something and somebody else will help you, but you can put it back.

A student who, in Gill's eyes, was not making a success of being at college had no close associates. She had a lot to say in class but was not liked.

Speaks without thinking, wants to be heard but is not prepared to listen to anybody else, very opinionated.

Gill enjoyed mutual support and conversation. The lecture theatre could make her feel as if the lecturer did not know who was there.

Perhaps lectures shouldn't be personal but I think it's easier when there's feedback and you're almost on a level.

She could think of only a few instances where it was not like that. Gill liked to be greeted personally or at least recognized. When there had to be a formal lecture she appreciated attempts to lighten the atmosphere.

Bringing things to life. You're writing away in the lecture and it might be a little thing that stops and makes you smile. You actually relate then to the person. I think it's just humanising things.

Assignments were an integral part of the learning.

They are rewarding, in that by the time you've actually got through it, you really have got so much more knowledge and awareness of what you're actually talking about. That is quite rewarding, the whole experience.

Marks do come into it but I don't think that's at the top of the list. It's more this whole growth as a person.

I asked what she meant by "growth".

We've sat and talked about it. One of the ladies, when we first talked about it, she didn't question things - this critical awareness. She enjoyed everything so much that she couldn't ever pick it to pieces, find fault. But now she's actually found that she can find things there. It is developing, this critical awareness of things.

Being able to express ideas without fear of "being put down" was greatly valued.

feeling more sure, more confident, not in a pretentious way, a new-found confidence, which I think we each have developed, in being able to question or to express without sort of feeling that its going to be....

Her own confidence had just been given another boost.

I was in the play last week, in 'Serious Money', a great experience. That was another sort of growth. I came back in the car thinking I actually, you know there was a whole audience, a full house. I only had a small part but that was just like a stepping stone really.

I enjoyed last year but this year it's even more enjoyable because **everything's coming together as well. It's like pieces of the jigsaw.** You start with just a few and then, as you build on it, you do the assignments, you go through the whole year - it just, it can only grow in one direction and everything just fits together.

Most of her friends would be majoring in English but Gill still felt unsure about what to do. That piece of the jigsaw remained out of sight.

MARTIN

(Mature: No A Level points)

When I met Martin again in November 1990, he was living out with Sarah. They had spent the summer together.

We unwrapped Christmas puddings for five weeks, my brother got me that job. These puddings are substandard, they don't meet the weight or they're too old to sell. We put them in a pile and they're mulched up into cattle feed. We did that for five weeks, me and Sarah. Sarah's a lovely lady, I'm very lucky, I keep telling myself that. I'm moody. I know my own faults, we get on pretty well. We went down to Didcot and delivered leaflets for some damned Pitman's agency, all round Didcot. What a place! They don't bury their dead, they stand them up in bus shelters.

Within the college, Martin greatly admired one of his tutors.

Dr James Dixon, this guy is magnificent. He saunters about, he'll put in a joke which, if you're not careful, you end up writing down. Everything he takes in his stride, he's incredibly coherent. I think he's wonderful. There's an air about the man, a very casual, dry sense of humour, he's really really good, love him to death. He makes it interesting and he loves his subject. I found him hard to write for because I want to say yes, I'm listening to what you say, and there was too much of that, a bit of hero worship and things like that,

which are perfectly right to admit to. They're all good but Dixon's the best.

Taking everything in one's stride and being at ease in front of others was not something that Martin could do himself. He had organised an evening of poetry reading, but he asked someone else to read his poem for him.

Doing something in front of people is very, very difficult for me. I've been prescribed betablockers from the doctor to calm me down, I'm a very shaky type of person.

Classes could be hard going. There was a new language to learn.

I don't know all the fancy ingredients, the cough mixture terms that they use to put a point of view across. There seems to be a very highbrow way of speaking. Well, perhaps it's just me being ignorant or something, but the phrases, the standard phrases, I can't quite fit in with. I don't grasp what people are saying or I may not have read the book. I don't feel with it when people talk about the book or, in History, we're doing the Industrial Revolution which I can barely remember from years ago in school.

Imagine a situation of a crowd round this table all discussing something; well, if I was in that room, I'd be stood by the door. I wouldn't have been involved, I'd be listening, half taking it in, half looking out of the window, out of fear of actually shouting out something in case my opinion could be shot down or whatever. But if I can contribute and want to contribute, I feel I'm getting a lot out of it, I feel part of it. Then, if there's like this table again, this is college for YOU. I'm outside this big college ring, but I can go into it sometimes.

Martin gave himself as the example of someone getting the most out of college. One notable triumph was an acting assignment in Drama.

I was absolutely mortified with terror, sleepless nights, bags under my eyes like shopping trolleys. We did a scene from Pinter's 'Old Times', where the pauses seem to make more difference than the words. We went through the ins and outs of it time and time again. I knew this bloody 'Old Times' backwards. We went up and did it. I got 65 and Rachel got 66 and Emma got 67. There's a tendency to think O my God, they're going to shoot us down in flames, and worry about appearing stupid in front of the people. But

we worked incredibly well as a group. The Drama guy actually said, "Well done! We thoroughly enjoyed the interpretation." He could see how mortified I was, like a bloody ironing board, but at the same time I was on cloud 18 when it finished and I was thinking yeah we did it! It didn't matter what the mark was. **It was a psychological battle for myself**, I got over that. I was so pleased!

It's a personal thing which is much worse than the sibling rivalry. You can tell people to go to hell, but you can't tell yourself to go to hell.

The memory of his first English timed assignment still stood out as his worst moment. It was his fault that he had misread the question; but, by the end of the first year, he had lifted his marks into the mid 50s and had achieved a self-set target of a 60 in each subject.

That said something to me. It said you are progressing, you are learning. You've got through, you're supposedly degree standard. You may not think so yourself but there must be something there. You can't get through this just by luck. A bell went off inside my head. Thank God for that. I'm through it! I didn't think I would, but I did it. There was a hell of an amount of relief, wiping my brow after toiling and labouring long and hard with my brain rather than physical. You know what farmers are like, it's stamina and staying power that wins through in the end.

Coming back I thought O my God, not all that again!

For his photograph of life at college Martin chose the image of two teabags and a cup to emphasise the talking.

It's not wading through a book by candlelight, it's through discussion. **The people I tend to associate with, they're not shirkers, they're in touch with it.**

Too many students who were not making a success of being at college, like those who were

only here for the beer. Too bloody idle to get a job. There's no real interest in the course. It's not real. People go through the motions because it's a doss.

Martin's associates were not like that. For the Pinter piece he chose to be with people he knew would not mess around, like Emma, a blonde girl. Did I know her?

PAM

(Mature: 14 A Level points)

In October 1990 I had my second interview with Pam, who had passed the first year with the average grades she predicted. Most of the time she talked about work and marks. My impression was of perseverance rather than excited engagement.

There was no doubt about her worst moment: it was the History examination at the end of the first year.

That has to be turning over the History paper. That was no fault of the exam. It was me really. I just felt insecure because I knew I had limited areas I could answer the questions on. I turned the paper over, looked for my areas; two were there and one was a bit wobbly. I felt quite ill that afternoon, really quite queer. I left about fifty minutes early simply because I was beginning to see stars.

Pam's History revision had not gone well. There had been upsets and illness and it "was not going in". In the event, she was given 50% for the wobbly one. She thought she had only just crawled over the line. Pam had got 50% for her first History assignment too. The problem was that she worried about what everyone else was doing and had "gone all round the houses".

I never did that before. I got on and wrote it myself, working on my own you see, with the National Extension College. The first one I did here, I naturally assumed everybody must know more than me so, like a fool, I went round listening to everybody else and finished up getting it all round my neck.

Her most disappointing assignment was in Geography.

I'd got the idea from one of the tutors that an assignment was done in a particular way, which I'd interpreted to mean for the Geography department as a whole, which turned out not to be the case. I mean, I still got a 50, but that wasn't really what I'd expected for that amount of effort.

Pam had quoted many statistics and sources and now thought that a straight essay might have kept a better flow. Her big success was in History, on a topic she had not been keen to choose at first; the role and status of women in the 17th century. She had come away from the tutorial armed with print-outs and articles, but, after a lot of work, a central theme had evaded her.

I felt I wasn't getting anywhere with the argument. I began to wonder if there was one half way through - so I sort of forced all this stuff together and, much to my amazement, it came out with 62. It didn't feel like it because I felt I must have missed the point, missed something important, that there must be something more there or they wouldn't have been asking the question in the first place.

She had noted what she saw as minor points resulting from the Puritan Revolution and I commented that they sounded like a movement backwards.

Yes! That's right! That was it you see, and I was unconsciously thinking it must be a forward one. You can see my problem can't you? I was trying to work forward to a point that wasn't there.

Pam was keen to get things right but she claimed that marks did not mean everything to her. She told me about a young mature whose sole object was a 2.1. It was an obsession, overshadowing everything, as if she were trying to prove something. The person she admired was another young mature who was working hard, going through things thoroughly and putting in a great deal of effort. She was aiming for a 2.1 but was getting the best out of the course as well.

One thing that she had found particularly frustrating was being let down by other students. Pam said she was not usually critical of tutors but,

if you're meant to work in a group and nobody sort of jollies along the people that don't turn up, it is a bit annoying, people that were allocated their job to do.

When others did not do their preparation towards group tasks, it was "a bit much". The most worrying thing though was

giving talks to the group. A lot of the mature students are sort of a bit scarey about that: you know, crawl under the desk. Very forbidding.

A trip to Ruskin and Wordsworth country as part of the Romanticism and Realism course had been a high spot for her. The students had spent three nights away from college and travelled in two minibuses which, she said, was an adventure in itself:

we got to know the younger ones in a different sort of way and particularly the group of young boys that tended to keep to themselves. They were really ever

so good. They were amazing. I mean one young chap that did a lot of the driving, he was marvellous. You know, when you got back late to the bus, where you expected some comments like you do on a coach tour, all the women that are late back because they're gassing. He didn't say anything at all. He just placidly sat there.

Her photograph to remember college by would be taken after the exams, before the final grades were known,

before everyone's running around saying who's been a good boy. Everybody out on the front lawn, like the History party at the end of term, just **everybody being themselves.**

IVAN (replaced Jason)

(22 yrs at entry: 16 points)

(English and Sociology with Romanticism and Realism)

Like Jason, Ivan had lived away from home, like Jason he had been to a larger HE institution, but there the resemblance ended. Jason talked with ease, Ivan was hesitant and halting. We met in October 1990. His father was a graduate in Psychology, a retired teacher, whose hobby was pottery. His mother's degree was in Graphic Design. They were both very proud of Ivan's sister at art college. Ivan was not artistic but a degree was expected of him. He had passed three A levels in 1986 and applied for universities and polytechnics.

I only got one place, which was to do Psychology at NELP (North East London Polytechnic) as it was then and, having thought about it, I thought I didn't really want to do that and I'd better take a few years off and decide what I did really want to do. I put down Psychology perhaps a bit indiscriminately. I just felt I was on a conveyor belt and I had to get off because I felt I don't know why I'm doing it, so I did a lot of reading and generally thinking. I had a lot of time to think about things.

Ivan went on the dole, which strained the atmosphere at home and when he got a job, matters hardly improved. In 1988 he moved out, first into lodgings and then into a shared flat. He said he felt like a visitor when he went home for weekends and holidays.

My parents didn't like me not starting university straight away and not doing anything. I didn't do anything for about a year. I had to really think about what I wanted to do. They wanted me to do something academic. I don't think they wanted me to

have a job. I think they ascribe people who haven't got a degree with low status so I thought I had to get a degree no matter what. In the end, I thought I wanted to get a degree as well.

Ivan had started a Sociology degree at polytechnic, but after a month he transferred to Bedford, where he could take English as well. We talked about the civil service job he had left.

It's very hierarchical. You have these grades - AA, AO, EO, HEO, - and it's quite confusing trying to remember what grade everyone is. You have to relate to them according to their grade and, as there's so many grades, you sometimes forget who's what grade and you don't know whether to be deferent or not.

College was quite a contrast. Were there times when he doubted his decision to come here?

Loads! When I first got here, I was living in the block and I didn't know any of the other people and I thought this place is a bit strange. Everyone was overly sociable, I thought perhaps in a kind of false way. I quite liked the degree of anonymity at the polytechnic where there's a certain amount of freedom whereas here I found it a bit claustrophobic the first month. I didn't see any problem in me closing my door and not really talking with other people. I just find it odd that people found that an unsocial thing to do. I got used to it though.

What would his snapshot of college life be?

It's pretty thought about, I'm not just coming out with it. All my friends out in the quad in front of the blocks, along the far end opposite the main entrance, just a photograph of them all there, almost like a school picture. It sounds a bit crass but that's what it would be, just to like formalise it, having everyone there.

One of the students he shared a house with said:

There's a bloke I live with, he joined the course late, in the first year. He's a really withdrawn, shy, nervous character. If he tried to form a sentence when we first met him, it would be, "But Er Er Er," all the time. He's a mature technically, but he's not mature you know. He lives with us. Now he's come out his shell and seems to be having the time of his life. He does things now that we do. I think he's really enjoying himself. (Andrew)

Ivan was sharing the house in Spenser Road and it could be hard to get down to work. There was someone there who had been to only one lecture the previous week. On the other hand there was a BEd student living with them, who was getting the best out of being at college.

He's got socialising and working all sorted out, integrated. He's enthusiastic whatever he's doing and seems to be able to work whenever there's a free moment.

Did Ivan prefer being in the house to living in college?

I think so. It's more like our house, we own it kind of thing. It gets a bit messy sometimes but apart from that... I've been trying to persuade people to clean it up and they just get annoyed. It's difficult trying to persuade people to do something they don't want to do. They just kind of leave things around and expect somebody else to tidy them up. I find that amazingly irritating.

Ivan would like to stay living out next year, but with a smaller group who were not so messy and noisy.

I like talking to mature students because they aren't so frenetic. There's definitely a gap. I can't put my finger on it, but there's a gap between the mature students and the young students. I suppose I'm a mature student.

I don't usually talk to matures, because they don't live on site. They didn't live on site last year and that was the basis for talking to people. Most of my friends are younger than me.

As far as the course was concerned, the bittiness of English, jumping from text to text, annoyed Ivan, but he was finding some coherence in his degree.

It all links in fairly well, that's not the difficulty. The difficulty's organisational; bringing the right folder in and getting the assignments done. It's almost like doing three degrees at once, but there's no difficulty in terms of relevance or anything. The difficulty's more kind of one of reading it all. I'm no good at working under pressure. I need a lot of time to think about things.

Ivan had had to resit a first year examination.

I hadn't really done much reading for the R and R course, devoting less time to it because it's only a

two year subject. Because I'm slow reading, I spend most of the time reading English and Sociology. It used to be whatever was interesting, but now it's whatever needs an assignment done.

Marks were not everything. His most rewarding assignment was one he had particularly enjoyed. The mark was poor.

We had to compare three different poems; Owen, Bronte and a modern one, minimalist, very atmospheric. And I like comparing things, finding contrasts. The more I looked the more contrasts I could find, like style, choice of words.

Ivan said he could always go back to the Civil Service or to local government after the course.

I could really do anything I wanted after I'd got a degree. I'd quite like to do research or become a journalist or something like that. I'm not sure.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TENSIONS OF ACADEMIC EXPOSURE

Neither Mark nor Jason had made a clear, firm decision to come to Bedford and neither had the course at the centre of his concerns. It showed in the routines they followed. Mark failed the first year and Jason moved to a polytechnic. Dan and Ivan became key informants and were similar in some respects to those they replaced: in the weakness of their commitment to the college and the course. Dan had wanted to work when he left school and made a late application to Bedford after failing to get a job during the summer. Ivan's decision to read for a degree was influenced by the expectations of his parents and taken after years of wavering. When he did decide on higher education, he started a Sociology degree at a polytechnic. He had wanted to take English, but his A Level English result had ruled that out. Taking some English was possible at Bedford and so he transferred to the College after a month.

Dan and Ivan becoming informants meant that data could be gathered about their early experiences of college as well, which helped the emerging analysis. Dan's worst and best moments were both to do with what he called "the social thing". Like those interviewed in the first year, he had felt unsure, worried both about loneliness and about relating to other students, about the **social exposure** referred to in the previous commentary. Almost echoing Jason, Dan said:

I find it difficult to start talking to people just in a bar or something.

If stories of their early experiences did not arise from the second interview schedule, prompts from the first were used. Ivan talked about doubting his decision to come to Bedford:

When I first got here, I was living in the block and I didn't know any of the other people and I thought this place is a bit strange. Everyone was overly sociable, I thought perhaps, in a kind of false way.

Coming a month late, when groups had formed, meant that Ivan's problems with social exposure were exacerbated. He found Polhill "claustrophobic" and "strange" and it seemed "odd" to him that closing one's door was seen as an "unsocial thing to do". He had "quite liked the degree of anonymity" at polytechnic, but he was swept into the activities of a group of young males who were to become an important part of his life. He chose to

share a house with them for his second year. It was a critical choice.

Ivan was classified by Registry as a mature student; he was over 21 and had been self-supporting. If he had kept company with other mature students, life might well have been less stressful. He liked mature students, who, in his words, were not "so frenetic". His having a room on site at Polhill when he arrived was unfortunate.

I don't usually talk to matures, because they don't live on site. They didn't live on site last year and that was the basis for talking to people.

For their second year, Ivan, Dan and Andrew, three of my informants, were in a group of eight young male students who were sharing a house together. It was a coincidence which concentrated their worlds under one roof and made my insight into student life more particular. On the other hand it gave more depth and their reports gave a triple perspective on what life in their house was like. It was a useful check on internal validity, a form of triangulation. (Burgess 1984) Their stories from Spenser Road showed the importance of where they chose to live and who they chose to be with, a choice which continued and concentrated the influence of the group and marked an important **informal transition** in their careers.

In the previous commentary chapter 'transition' was used in a more usual way to refer to starting a new career as a student. Successful completion of a student career in that formal sense involves facing the structural demands of doing the set work and being judged. The students in this inquiry faced continuous assessment, assignments and examinations. Intermediate **formal transition points** were: passing the first year or Part One; passing the two year subject; choosing a three year subject as the major and deciding on a special study topic in readiness for the final assessments. In Part Two, ie years two and three, all marks contributed to the class of honours. Martin expressed the significance that getting through the transition to that second stage had had for him:

A bell went off inside my head. Thank God for that. I'm through it! I didn't think I would, but I did it. There was a hell of an amount of relief...

The initial interviews with staff suggested the second year was quiet: a "comparatively easy time", the course leader said; a year which, in the counsellor's words, gave students "more space and time". Quietness, however, was not a feature of the inner lives of these student informants. The second interview had taken place in the first half of the second year, the items inviting data

on the students' priorities, particularly on how they regarded the course itself and how they managed the work. Their responses showed the tensions they were feeling, tensions generated by the formal demands to write assignments, be tested and judged, the tensions of what might be called 'academic exposure'.

Being exposed to academic requirements and judgements is something all students have to face, but the tensions these informants felt were by no means the same. They faced **different sorts of challenge** and they responded in different ways, which reflected their priorities, their histories and the situations they found themselves in, whether by pressure, choice or chance. Most obvious was the need to balance social life and study in a **workable routine**. The most successful students were seen as both popular socially and good academically, not obsessively concerned with work nor excessively neglectful of it. There were tensions between the pursuit of interest and of marks, between 'deep' and 'surface' approaches to learning, (Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle 1984) and there was some evidence of students feeling forced into surface approaches by the workload. (Ramsden 1992)

One source of tension was simply having to **organise time** for college work; "juggling other things as well", Gill, a mature day student, said. The course was at the centre of her life and she was determined to put as much into it as she could and felt frustrated when she could not find all the time she wanted for study. Dan, on the other hand, had plenty of time available, but preferred to do other things. He avowed disapproval for someone who hardly ever went to lectures, but his own behaviour put the course at the margins of his life. He needed the discipline of deadlines, external motivators. Dan expressed his **weakness of will** very clearly:

I find sometimes when we're all just sat there talking, it's difficult to sort of leave the group, go upstairs and work. It is difficult.

Setting a time every night specifically to work, I wish I could do that.

Dan's wishing to leave the group was not strong enough to translate into action, but it was enough to make him feel uneasy. The student he thought was successful was socially at ease and popular and also had the will to work when he wanted to.

Nicola enjoyed the company of friends but did not find it difficult to get down to work. Her tension was in knowing that she was not working efficiently. She was a self-confessed slow reader, who looked at "every single

word", and she knew that she should be more selective in her note-taking.

I'll write word for word what they've written. It's so time-wasting, but I worry about the way I express myself.

Emma was not finding it easy to balance her routine in the second year. The "work started to mount up" and she became heavily involved in a play; at some points it was quite a miserable existence". She felt overloaded and suffered similar frustrations to Nicola.

I just sort of get the notes, a lot of time spent reading books. I normally find with me, I'm getting a bit better, but I like to get everything down you know from the book, which means I rewrite the book sometimes. I've got to stop myself and think, you haven't got time to do this you know, just get the bits you need.

These were not just failures in study skills. Emma's and Nicola's reluctance to leave the security of the texts reflected to a more general lack of personal confidence. Emma gave a shy person as an example of a student who was not getting the most out of college. In fact, Emma was shy herself, a "bit reclusive" in Martin's words. She told me she was self-conscious. Nicola's A Level results had left her apologetic and feeling "terribly thick". Lured by the attractions of his group, Dan was avoiding academic exposure by not getting down to work. Emma and Nicola did not avoid work, but they drew back from exposing themselves to criticism. In a similar way Pam was avoiding the exposure of independence by "listening to everybody else" and by trying to work out the expected pattern for assignments.

For Gill "critical awareness" was what the course most engendered and demanded. She spoke of a "new-found confidence" in "being able to question or express" and of her "whole growth as a person". Nonetheless, at this stage, she was keeping her personal life apart and "steering away from gender, feminism, that kind of thing". Perhaps she was unaware that it was the kind of thing that had the most existential meaning for her. She was "more into" the theories of Marx and Durkheim, and found them easier to work through in her mind. At a less conscious level gender was a source of inner conflict for her. The powerful emotional meaning that feminism actually had came out in later interviews.

Martin was "a very shaky type of person". Unused to the "very highbrow way of speaking" and the "cough mixture terms" that people used to make their points, he felt

"outside this big college ring". Martin worried "about appearing stupid". It was particularly daunting to have to perform a scene from Pinter in front of his Drama group and their tutor. It was not just an exercise for Martin the student, it engaged the whole person. What he said about it expresses well the reductionism in seeing Emma's problems with note-taking only as a lack of study skills or Gill's steering away from gender issues as an academic preference for grander theory:

It was a psychological battle for myself, I got over that. I was so pleased.

Martin added:

It's a personal thing which is much worse than the sibling rivalry. You can tell people to go to hell, but you can't tell yourself to go to hell.

"Sibling rivalry" was expressed most obviously through the grading system. Pam, used to working alone, had been surprised and unnerved by the extent to which students compared their marks. In the second year, marks began to count towards the award, making it increasingly possible to predict one's likely class of honours and adding to competitive conversation. Getting high marks and a good class of honours could become an obsession overshadowing the experience of being at college. To the tension between the personal and the competitive was added the related tension between understanding and interest and amassing marks. The pursuit of interest and the pursuit of grades are not of course mutually exclusive but conflict did arise, and not only for those with their sights set on the highest grades:

It used to be whatever was interesting, but now it's whatever needs an assignment done. (Ivan)

Ivan's most rewarding assignment was one which he had particularly enjoyed doing. The mark was low. Although students whose conversation revolved around marks were not approved of, "rewarding" and "disappointing" were linked to marks for most informants. Nicola said that most students were "sinners" in being more keen to know what would earn them good marks than on learning in a wider sense.

Reactions to disappointing assignment marks varied and revealed an interesting range of attitudes. Ivan said he was a slow reader and did not work well under pressure. Gill responded to a good grade in English by wanting to know how she could have got more, given the effort she had put in. A low average grade for a lot of work confirmed Pam in her perception of herself as "not that

good". The attribution of responsibility differed. Nicola expected a low mark for a rushed assignment. It was her fault for not organising her time. Martin had not read the question; his fault. Emma's low marks were the result of her own inadequacies; she had "not quite got to grips with it". In contrast, Dan and Andrew did not accept that they could have been at fault:

42% disappointing mark. I told him and he went through it again. I think it was all personal opinion really. He didn't like it, I thought it was good. (Dan)

I was dead pleased with it. We've got a new tutor. I don't know whether she's marking them right or what. A lot of us have been getting low marks and she gave me 36%. (Andrew)

Andrew questioned the grade and it was remarked at 41%, just a pass. Andrew thought it was worth much more.

In analysing student informants' accounts, the concepts of social and academic exposure were advanced as ways of seeing the challenges they faced. Data from the second interview illustrated the pressures the informants felt in facing the structural demands of study. Some sources of tension overlapped with others, over dependence and self-consciousness for example, and most affected more than one student, but the range of inner conflicts was striking, showing the differences in the challenges they faced. The list below gives a brief recapitulation:

Making time available for study: "juggling other things as well". (Gill)

Weakness of will: being unable "to sort of leave the group, go upstairs and work". (Dan)

Dependence and over-reliance on others, particularly authorities: "I'll write word for word what they've written. It's so time-wasting". (Nicola); "I rewrite the book sometimes." (Emma); "I went round listening to everybody else." (Pam)

Feeling an outsider: when you "don't grasp what people are saying" in their "highbrow way". (Martin)

Compartmentalising academic and personal meanings: "I tend to steer away from gender, feminism, that kind of thing." (Gill)

Concern over self-image: "I'm a bit self-conscious as well." (Emma); "giving talks to the group...Very

forbidding." (Pam); "worry about appearing stupid... a psychological battle". (Martin)

Working for oneself and/or in competition with others: "It's a personal thing which is much worse than sibling rivalry." (Martin)

Interest and assessment: "It used to be whatever was interesting, but now it's whatever needs an assignment done." (Ivan)

Facing judgement and personal responsibility: "it was all personal opinion really. He didn't like it, I thought it was good." (Dan); "I don't know whether she's marking them right or not." (Andrew)

Andrew said he was having problems with this tutor.

Whatever is said is like the Gospel, and if you question it, you're frowned upon.

In contrast, a "brilliant" History tutor gave the facts and presented opposing arguments. Nonetheless, Andrew dismissed the degree as "a Mickey Mouse course", with so much being done at a superficial level. The way they did things was "laughable" and did not demand enough of him.

What informants said about the course and about tutors and their styles was interesting but was not pursued in terms of a critique of the college. The main point was what the student informants were experiencing and what their words said about them. In what Andrew said there was an ambivalence towards knowledge, between wanting facts and arguments spelt out with authority and wanting an open situation in which knowledge was accepted as contestable and the participants as equals; between **dependence and independence**. In fact the blend of methods at BCHE seemed to be about right in that regard. Martin spoke warmly of set lectures by a "magnificent guy" who combined coherence with casual humour. There was "a bit of hero worship" there. Gill preferred the atmosphere of small groups "when there's feedback and you're almost on a level". Being on a level was not only a matter of epistemological tolerance. To be recognised and greeted by name was an important part of a friendly, supportive college ethos.

Feeling valued extended to contexts outside the formal sessions and could work with or against them. Gill's group of friends, mature day students, were a source of mutual comfort and stimulation. They helped each other through emotional lows and "bounced ideas off each other" as they discussed their work. Dan, Andrew and Ivan shared a house with other students but seemed to

keep their work hived off as a personal matter. Their focus was on social life so that being one of the group could make it especially difficult to summon up the will to work. It was probably an overstatement when Martin said there were too many people with "no real interest in the course" who were "only here for the beer", but he had a point. For his own part, he said:

The people I tend to associate with, they're not shirkers, they're in touch with it.

Interestingly, Martin and Gill gave themselves as examples of students who were getting the most out of the course and they probably owed that in no small part to their choice of **associates**. The importance of friends was a clear message in the data and very clear in the photographs the students said they would take to portray college life. Gill had canteen coffees and lots of chatting in her picture. Martin chose two teabags and a cup to emphasise conversation. Andrew's friends "would have to be in a pub because that's where we spend most of our waking hours."

It seemed reasonable in the light of what was emerging to base the third interview on the informal and gather more data on friendship and support. Informants would be more than half way through the course and so the idea of direction was introduced, which made a journey metaphor appropriate. These people were ostensibly travelling the same road to a common destination. It was a Chaucerian image of how people related, and helped or hindered each other along the way.

There were three shifts of emphasis in items from the second to the third schedule: a shift of focus from the course itself to **support networks**, from the formal to the informal; the introduction of the idea of a sense of **direction** in terms of "making good progress", leaving "the main path", "going nowhere"; and further moves towards the inclusion of more elements of judgement and **reflection**, ie "the best thing you have done" compared with "the time you most enjoyed", and "your biggest mistake" as opposed to "your worst moment". Included in the preamble was invitation to informants to revisit earlier experiences and look back with fresh eyes. This would be a check on the authenticity of previous data and a way of seeking any **changes in perception**.

The third interview schedule is given on the next pages. Interviews took place between March and June 1991, with one exception which was delayed.

THIRD INTERVIEW: YEAR TWO - 1991

Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed again. The procedure will be much as before. The list of prompts is there to help you focus your thoughts. As you know, I am trying to build up a bank of stories to give me a richer insight into what you see as particularly significant in your career as a student, 'career' being meant in the widest sense, not necessarily restricted to attendance at college and fulfilling course requirements. Most of what you tell me will probably refer to times since we last met, but it may also be that you now see episodes from before that time in a new light and so I would not wish you to feel restricted.

Please read through the prompts and pick out those which ring a bell, which jog you into remembering things that actually happened. I don't expect you to respond to every item, but it would help if you could have a stab at the first two and then at least another six. I'm interested in the details of what actually happened, in factual accounts of situations (this includes facts about how you felt and what led up to those feelings). Try to remember as much as you can: it might help if you start by pinpointing when particular events, episodes and encounters took place and then go on to fill in the details.

As I stressed before, you are not expected to give names and you will not be named: strict confidentiality will be observed.

Please begin by telling me about:

- 1 the best thing you have done since you became a student
- 2 the biggest mistake you've made since becoming a student

Now, please try to recall times when:

- 1 you felt very much on your own
- 2 you felt you were in good company
- 3 you felt a strong sense of direction
- 4 you felt you had left the main path
- 5 you felt you were making good progress
- 6 you felt you were going nowhere
- 7 you felt in need of a helping hand
- 8 you felt especially well supported
- 9 you felt you had taken a wrong turn
- 10 you felt pleased to be shown another way
- 11 you felt you'd earned a good rest
- 12 you felt like going back to where you came from

- 13 you felt the going was too tough to bear
- 14 you felt you'd helped someone along the way
- 15 you felt you were just being swept along

CHAPTER NINE

THE SECOND YEAR INTERVIEWS: 2

NICOLA
(6 A Level points)

The third interview was in June 1991 when Nicola was coming to the end of her second year. I asked her to tell me the best thing she had done as a student.

I don't know that it's the best thing I've done, it's more like the best way I've changed since I've become a student. I think I've become more aware of things that are around me. It's not an actual thing that I've done, it's perhaps more of a **development of my own ideas.**

Perhaps the best thing I've done was to work in France, going on my own last summer. It was going on my own. In that way I was becoming confident. I think that my beliefs and my ideas have become a lot more solid since I've had the confidence to get away and to look at things myself. I worked in a hotel. I was cleaning, nothing glamorous, but it was nice to be in France and to speak the French and have a job. I was working with French people mostly during the day, but there were English people there that I could fall back on. There was a chef and another girl that worked along with me. The chef didn't speak French so it was good for translation practice. I went for about ten weeks.

Asked about her biggest mistake, Nicola said there was nothing major.

There are always small problems when I need someone else to talk to, but it's only small-scale. It's not as if I want to go home or anything. Nothing drastic at all. It's just like small problems with assignments. Nothing really.

It's the Caves Lane bunch again. I'm a terrific worrier and so if there's any problems I'll be going down to where they live now and **they'll help me out.** They're not on the same course as me but they're older and they've been out in the world. One of the girls is about 24. She'll look at life in a more relaxed way. If I'm worried and she's relaxed it'll bounce off. She's a BA student. They're all very supportive so I've never felt too much on my own. It's getting things sorted out in my head. When I talk about things it helps a lot, whether they understand or not; sitting there and listening to

you. And if they say they understand something that I've been confused about, I feel a lot better.

Three weeks before we met, Nicola had had an exam and had tried out her ideas on her friends first. They had helped with an assignment too, taking parts in a film she was making.

I turned up at their place at about 9.30 thinking, Right, we've got to have the whole day. They were still in bed and I was panicking, thinking there's no way I'm going to get this done today. One of the girls said, "Yes fine. We'll get it done." We did, in a couple of hours.

Would she like to live at George Street with them?

No! I like **my independence**, I like to be able to go home when I want to and to have my own space. I like to be able to get away from people and get on with my work whenever I want to and sit with a cup of coffee. If I lived at George Street I think I'd be **tempted to stray from my work**. I've got a desk in my room whereas in George Street there are no desks. You have to go and work in the dining room. I think I'd be distracted too much if I lived there. I like to be living independently, doing things, cooking whenever I want to. It's like I'm choosing when I want to see them rather than being forced to see each other as I would if I lived there.

A boyfriend came into the conversation. Nicola had met him during her sister's first year at university. It seemed to be a relationship that did not distract her from working. She had been in Bristol for the previous couple of weeks.

It's good to see him. I went there the day after my Drama exam, on the Saturday. Because my sister was going to spend a lot of time working for her finals, she was going to go into the library a lot and I had to get on with two more assignments. So the two weeks I was in Bristol I did spend a lot of time in the library, in fact one and a half weeks. After I'd got my assignments out of the way, I thought the main things are out of the way now, completely out of the way. This is time for looking at Bristol, enjoying the surroundings.

French was her choice as a major subject. It meant spending a year in France and returning for a fourth year to finish the degree under a new modular structure. She was not happy about that but, in response to items on the schedule, she said she had not taken a wrong

turn, had not left the main path, and had never felt she was being swept along by the tide.

I feel pleased with what I've done. I mean I'd have loved to go back and do my A levels again, do better and feel proud that I got high marks because I'm not too proud of the grades that I did get. That's why I want to get a really good mark from here.

She said she was learning something new with each assignment. One she had particularly enjoyed had involved taking a critical stance to a novel; a Marxist, Leavis or feminist approach. Studying Marx had opened her eyes to what she was thinking already. The grade was still to come.

I asked what she would be doing over the holiday.

I'll go back home and get a job. I'm going to try for a strawberry field, working at weighing. They have special equipment, polystyrene things, so that they'll still be out in September. It's not fantastic work but I'll be getting money and I'll be aiming to use the money for next year.

She got her job in the strawberry field and then went to Cannes as an assistant in a technical school for a year.

DAN (replaced Mark)
(8 A Level points)

I interviewed Dan again towards the end of May 1991. The main themes were still his friends and his weakness of will.

The second year you feel a bit more cut off from college. It's been good in the house because we have a really good time, have a laff in the living room and that.

There had been a problem with a girl "messing him about". It seemed a big thing at the time, but having a girlfriend was not Dan's avowed priority.

The greatest thing I've achieved is my friends here. I've been really pleased with the people I've met and got on with and I'm living with. I've disliked the course a bit this year and at times I've felt a bit down, but the thing that's kept me going is because I'm living with them. It's like you come in at nights and everyone was going through the same sort of things as yourself and so you'd got someone to relate to.

Dan had let things slip earlier in the year, getting up late, hanging around and walking in town. He said it felt like he was on the dole, which reminded me of what Andrew had said.

There is a guy I live with, we call him "the dolite" because I think he was made to be on the dole. He gets out of bed about 2.00 every afternoon and sits around in his dressing gown. He might have a wash and go to the pub. He got a warning the other day from David Hewitt saying that if he didn't buck his ideas up, David would have to take some steps.

(Andrew 18.1.91)

At weekends Dan worked at a service station. During the week, he got up late, missed lectures and just wandered.

When you get into a routine of doing that it's really bad. You find it difficult to pull yourself out of it and I was getting quite worried about it. I knew my priorities weren't right. I knew I was here to get a degree and I was ignoring that fact. I got a letter from David Hewitt about lack of lectures. That sort of gave me the kick I needed. I think I needed someone to tell me that I was like wasting away.

I think if it was just me doing it, I wouldn't have been in the rut so long; I'd have been aware that I was doing something bad. But everyone was doing it.

I often feel I've been just swept along by what everyone else wants to do. Last year we used to play drinking games in our rooms and we played it on the field once. We'd get a few bottles of Thunderbird in, it's quite strong. With dice, coins, sat in a circle, about ten of us. The loser has to drink three fingers, two fingers, depends to what extent he's lost the game.

It started in the first year when there was this feeling of commitment to the other people. If you didn't go out you got the feeling they might think you were being a bit funny. Well that's what I thought. We did things I didn't really want to do some nights, like they all wanted to go out on a massive pub crawl and I didn't really want to, but I didn't want to say no because it might look bad. Looking back, I suppose I enjoyed the night, but I wish I had a bit more willpower about me to say no and do what I wanted to really do, like stay in and do a bit of work.

When I first got to college, everything's going on and you don't like the idea of staying in at nights and working. I didn't equal it out proportionately. I got in with a few mates and we started going out a lot. It was good, but it's caught up with me now.

Had he ever felt he was getting nowhere?

I'd had a few to drink and I got up and I'd had it all planned to get up early to do a full day's revision seeing as we had no lectures, and I wasted the morning in bed, got up in the afternoon, couldn't get into doing much work.

It's usually on the days where you've missed a few lectures, got loads of assignments to do but you can't be bothered to sit down and do them, and you wonder what you're doing it all for anyway, what you're doing this degree for. If I knew what I was doing it for, it might inspire me to work more.

It was too easy to get by without doing much in the second year. Now he faced choosing a major subject and his marks in English had slipped. History was less abstract, but he had no A level background in it.

Now I'm really confused as to what I'm doing, what I'm going to do, in major minor. It's in the back of my mind all the time.

Dan planned to go home to work out what he wanted to do.

I like being alone sometimes, having a bit of privacy, just to get away from it, take a step back and think about what I'm doing. In the house, it revolves and revolves and you just get caught up in what's happening and you lose track of what you want to do.

Andrew had said the "dolite" was doing a degree to avoid getting a job and "spend some of the taxpayers' money". In fact, Dan had tried to get a job before he came to college, but there was a general aimlessness.

I've never really felt a strong sense of direction at school or since I've got to college. I still don't really know what I want to do, I didn't know whether I really wanted to do a degree. Since I've been at college, nothing's really changed. I don't know what I want to do after college. I'm just buying a bit of time like.

Financially Dan was coping. He had worked at a service station from January to April to pay off an overdraft.

Another was beginning to build up, but a summer job would put it right. The group in the house would be splitting up. Dan and three others planned to look for another house, preferably nearer to Polhill.

EMMA

(18 A Level points)

In May 1991 the interview centred on three main themes: drudgery and mid-course blues, a joy in being liked and supported, and the importance of who you live with. Emma's room was very cold and the distance from Polhill was a problem and so in February she had moved with two others to another shared house. The house was fine but one of the students they now shared with was not. She was seeing a counsellor and also poured her troubles to anyone who happened to be around.

You're trying to do your work and you have somebody who's making things quite difficult.

This person was obviously getting a lot of help you know from lecturers as well and we felt a bit, almost left out in a way. We had to cope with living with this person as well and it has been, well it still is, difficult.

It seems so silly, but pressures in the house have been really quite high. I've been longing to get home. It's awful to say it, but it's true. I hadn't realised how important it is where you live outside of college. You choose people, but you don't always know what they're like. You find out all their sides when you live with them.

'Serious Money' remained the high point for her. Being supported and appreciated in that was a good feeling.

Good company? As I say, it's been easier this year. I've found friends and things, doing activities, the play.

Well supported? Really I would have to take it back to when I was in the play because all my friends would come round and my parents came down. That was a very nice feeling to know that people were all there, came to see me.

Another good time was working on making a film.

All that work that's sort of splayed out over a whole term, it suddenly came together which was nice. I don't know whether it seems good to anyone

else but I was pleased with it. You had the ideas but you had to work with others.

In January the pressures were building up and 'Serious Money' had been an extra. It had taken up too much of her time and her work had fallen behind. Her personal tutor had arranged some rescheduling of assignment dates but life became very burdensome.

The second term was, I don't know what happened there, but we seemed to be feeling a bit low with the course. A lot of people were having thoughts about why they were here, just thinking we didn't know what we were doing, where we were going, just feeling that we wanted to move on faster you know. It was just dragging on, a lot of assignments as well. They'd given us an awful lot of work to get on with and it seemed never ending. You wanted to get on to after college, to move on a bit, because you'd gone right through school and then straight into college. It was like you just work, work, work, and no sort of fun really. I've just had to knuckle down and get things done.

Now it was May with examinations and more assignments. A History essay had had to be rushed. Her village study should be nearing completion but getting data for it was proving more difficult than she had thought. There was plenty going on socially, but it was not for Emma. She looked back to the play with a certain wistfulness.

I don't know if I'd have managed it this term with exams and things. I'm missing out. **It's very difficult to get a balance between your work and outside things.**

It doesn't feel like it's coming up to the end of term yet. I'm just having to get on with the work and I'm getting nowhere really, not really having a good social life or anything at the moment. **It's just basically drudgery. What I'm trying to do is keep a hold on the course.**

French would be Emma's major and going to France for a year would mean that she could return to the new modular scheme and take Drama in her final year. Six people were going, two as students at the University of Tours, four as assistants elsewhere. Final details were still to be confirmed. Emma hoped that she and her friend Rachel would be together. She thought it was "going to be quite a shock". Finding a job for the long vacation to top up her funds was a first priority and she was looking to the pie packing factory for that. Her longer term future

remained vague. She was considering a career in the theatre but also wanted to use her French.

ANDREW
(20 A Level points)

None of the arrangements I made to interview Andrew again in his second year worked out. When we did meet, he was into the first term of the third year. I failed to set the tape. By then our relationship was such that he readily offered to do the interview again. Over the summer he had found a part-time job locally and had rented a room in college. He was staying in college for his third year. That was what he wanted. Andrew thought that becoming a student was the best thing he had done, it was his opportunity to leave home. He said the big break had come after his first long vacation when he had worked in a pickle factory.

That was the catalyst, why I decided to change everything. It got me to an emotional low, a couple of months that I loathed. I took it out on everyone round me and I had a horrible time at home. My relationship with my parents deteriorated. In the end I plucked up the courage and decided to finish with my girlfriend, come down here, make some relationships with people I'd got to know in the first year and start really building up a life.

He began his "new life" in Spenser Road.

I was in a house where noone did any work. Ivan tried, but he was the only one and it forced him to leave in the end.

It was the same sort of problem that I had. I said I felt undisciplined. Well, he felt the same. **Spenser Road got to me, but it got to Ivan a hell of a lot more.** I felt like getting away from everyone, giving up on Bedford College, but in the end reason got the best of me.

During the previous interview Andrew had told me that his girlfriend at college was "nothing serious". Now that seemed to have been an understatement.

The main path, in my eyes, would be to keep good company, do your work and have time to enjoy yourself as well, which I don't do. I've got too much work, a job and a girlfriend who suffocates me.

His job was in a factory canteen on weekday afternoons.

I enjoy that. A lot of people think it's a bit of a bind, half past three, off to work again. And I always think thank God I am going. I'd be either sitting in my bedroom here or going to my girlfriend's house. It gives me an excuse to be by myself for a little while.

The only real company I've got is people at work. They consider me as someone at work. I latch on to them as the best company I keep because it's the only company I keep.

A pretty sad state of affairs to be in. I came down here for a change and I haven't got one. Instead of being in a rut at home, I'm in a rut in Bedford.

I did take a wrong turn by allowing my life to get out of control again. A lot of people do things subconsciously and, when it's pointed out to them, they do something about it. I don't! All this time I've known, just haven't done anything about it. I haven't got the guts. I don't like changing things and I don't like upsetting anyone.

I've come to realise that it's all up to me. Hoping for a helping hand is just my way of copping out. I should do something about everything that's wrong. I wish something would happen, whether it came in the form of a helping hand or whether fate just dealt me a blow or whatever thing I could use. If she heard this tape, perhaps that would do it for me.

Andrew told me that he was getting nowhere personally or socially but he was getting through the course.

Here I am at the beginning of the third year and I've just wasted one. I seem to be moving along more steadily towards the degree, which is what I'm here for really.

His marks were higher now, averaging over 60%. The film he had made the previous year was graded at 75% .

I'd never made one before. The end product wasn't brilliant. Other people's were awful really. I sat in a car boot holding a camera and I got praised to the heavens for innovative work. You can get by doing the minimum here and it's not good enough. You should be made to do more.

The only sense of excitement I detected was in an idea for a film he had sent to Anglia TV in a competition.

GILL

(Mature: No A Level points)

Our third meeting was in June 1991. Gill's life at home was becoming more unsettled. With their landlord's return to England, she and her husband faced another move and cracks were becoming visible in the marriage. On the other hand, her identification with college was clear in her dress and manner. Becoming a student was, Gill said, the best thing she had ever done. I asked what had given her the most pleasure:

Achieving I think, going somewhere. I mean I've been very pleased with what I've got back from it, marks for example, and surprised myself really. It's opened lots of new doors, new avenues for me, just how I approach life. I'm more aware of things, it's given me new insights and different ways to tackle things.

Becoming a student was also her biggest mistake.

I have to say that, because it's been a strain; one, on my marriage and, two, on my family relationships, very much so. Both my husband and my family, it's my mother and my brother I'm talking about, have said how much I've changed and they don't like what they see. Actually, for the first time probably, I'm not manipulated by people.

Gill having a point of view and defending it, Gill having her own priorities and not being available to do domestic tasks, were not welcomed. She had travelled as an air hostess but that had not been a threat.

My family would just say, "O Gill's dotted off to Los Angeles" or whatever. It was almost like given a glamour bit as well and that was OK, made it safe.

Being a serious student was not safe. There came a point when she could not even discuss it and being on her own was more attractive than being in lonely company.

I have isolated myself through choice recently, just before the exams I was literally physically on my own. I actually changed locations for a while. It was to do with everything within the marriage, so I chose to be, but found it very difficult. I did feel very alone then. It was me and that was it.

Gill wanted to be her own person. She felt she should not go back to seeing the counsellor, not even in this "pits crisis", when problems at home were overshadowing

the pressures of doing the course. Her strength was in her friendships at college.

I feel it even more so this year that relationships here in the college have been more established. They've progressed and it is good company. I think **you find where you want to be and the people that you want to be with.**

The course was tough with so many demands. She had even missed Monday morning sessions for a few weeks to keep up with assignments.

Yes, I've had moments when I've actually thought; Gosh! This has been much harder than I ever thought. But no, I don't wish I hadn't. (come to college)

I've found this last sort of hill quite hard. I don't think it was a shove I needed, I was doing that myself. It was trying to summon up energy and that same kind of keenness because you feel as if you've been wrung out a little bit.

I think that the **workload**, it's really for people that are wanting to do it. I mean, you can either scrape through and not do an awful lot or you can **actually make it as hard as you want to.**

For the final year she would study English as the major. One assignment had finally made up her mind on that. It was graded at 77%.

We had to look at the endings of three novels and I felt so underconfident within the group anyway so it really did... I felt very pleased. I'm very erratic with all my marks. I started off high with Sociology but now I actually feel that **the English is coming from the inside.** It was **my own feelings all coming out**, whereas Sociology has to be, I don't know, how I've tried to do it is read my bits, do my notes and then I had all that system of trying to do the thing but that English that I had done, I felt I was just writing on to the paper what I wanted in large part. I mean I had done research. It might have been a one off but I decided I wanted to do English quite some time ago really.

I'm seeing Linda about **my special study for next year.** Linda is absolutely wonderful we all think. I've asked if she can tutor me. You're given quite a free rein really. I hope to be able to use a lot of the film knowledge that we learnt this last year in Drama and try and combine the two around the idea of **looking at female writers and how their messages,**

political messages, get changed in film if they're directed by a male.

Their ideas were not just changed, they were suppressed. Gill's insistence on "suppressed" reminded me of the first year when she had tended to "steer away from gender, feminism, that kind of thing".

Teaching was still in her mind, but not having GCSE Maths was a problem. Going straight on to a PGCE without a break did not appeal in any case. During the summer she would be working in the shop.

But I've made a mental note that I'm not going to do too much there, because most importantly I'd like to feel as though I was in control and getting organised with things for next year in college.

MARTIN

(Mature: No A Level points)

I met Martin again in May 1991. There were times when he still felt exposed and out of place.

I have various quaint descriptions of things which people laugh at and I wonder whether that's undermining the validity of my point of view. "O it's Martin, he comes up with a funny comment."

While David was talking I put my elbow down on the table, slap bang in the middle of the computer keys and it went Dut! Every head turned. I went bright red because all I could do with a computer was make it go Dut!

Having collected an assignment, Martin had once found himself with a group of mature females.

I got 55 and I felt stupid sitting by the side of them. I felt they were being a bit elitist. One of them was saying she was in dire straits because her lowest mark was 61. They asked how I had done and fobbed me off with, "O well, it's a pass isn't it?" And then they left me out of it.

Martin was happiest with small groups, centred on work. It was what he had been used to.

Four people, the boss, the boss's father, the boss's wife and me, that was it. You felt part of a little group, especially when he went on holiday and I was left in charge. There's none of that in here. I gather this is a small college and I feel part of it

sometimes, but I don't feel part of it a lot of the time, coming from something that's very close-knit. I'm not saying that people are merely statistics in this place, that's half of the truth, but it is a much wider range. It's me being taken along with the tide rather than being in control.

When I go home I cannot talk, well I can talk about what I've done at college, but I don't think it'll mean anything to anybody so I don't. They tend to regard me as being at school. The main path was something cultivated by my family, to go out and get a job, 2.3 children and a house and all that, and I have left their main path. But I haven't found one of my own yet, still looking.

I think I became very snobbish actually, I was really surprised. I met a girl in the Kentucky Fried Chicken place. I walked in and was getting something to eat and she came up to me and started talking and she asked me what I did for a living. And she said, "You must be dead clever you, to do a degree" and I thought please go away.

But Martin's pride was double-edged.

My mother had a "You go out and get and some work done" philosophy. I'm sure you experienced the same things. If you wanted a pop record, a book or a video or whatever, "You buy it! We don't buy it for you." I've worked and I've bought my own school uniform and I wanted to do that and I was very proud of that.

After Christmas the workload had become intense. Martin was feeling under pressure and was dismissive of some of the "more fanciful" theory behind literary criticism.

The balancing act! At times I was falling flat on my back, getting frustrated with the daunting workload of having to devote an equal amount of effort to three areas. I'm reasonable at Drama. I'm not great, but I know roughly what I'm talking about. History, I find I'm a little vague about, and English, I just tend to sit back and listen to some of these theories and say, "What!" We were doing a poem by Robert Frost, the anal retentive theory, and I think it's best summed up by its name to be honest.

My image of the Brontes has been coloured by Blue Peter. These are the little books that they wrote their novels in. This is Howarth, people dying of consumption all over the place, black sinister trees and things like that, and this is the church; very

twee. I find it very difficult to get past that and so there's a tendency for me to dismiss things on sight, which is very unhealthy I think.

On the other hand, in a History assignment:

I'd dismissed the idea because it was mine, you know, and I'd done that on a couple of other occasions as well. Because it was my idea, because I hadn't read it in a book, I thought it was wrong.

The tutors were his "good company", but it was Sarah who gave him most support and help.

I'll present an argument to her and, I'm not saying that she'll know it all, but she will say, "Are you sure you can say that because that's what they're after?" You know, she'll help me focus in on it.

They had become engaged the previous December. I asked how he thought he would have got on without her.

I don't know. I don't know whether I'd still be here. Part of me says that I wouldn't. If ever I need a helping hand I choose Sarah first of all, but if Sarah can't put me right, then I'll go and see Maggie.

Martin met Maggie, the counsellor, every week. She had arranged help for him with essay technique because, as he put it, his essay writing was "not the greatest in the world".

He thought his film was the best thing he had done.

I'm very proud of that, something that's mine and really different. I've shown it to various people and they say how good it is. It's about a lady who commits suicide, a prostitute lying in a bath, slashed her wrists. It's recounting events in her life that made her do it. It's an exploration of despair. I really do think it works. It went in two weeks ago. I should get it back in June.

PAM

(Mature: 14 A Level points)

In March 1991 Pam was coming out of a particularly low period.

Just before half term there seemed to be a general sort of flat feeling. Everybody was saying, I'm glad we've got two days off next week sort of thing, but

it was a bit more than that - almost am I doing the right thing? You're half way through, but you've got half way to go and you've got a whole load of assignments.

The weather was gloomy and cold. The Gulf War was having an effect, some people had relatives involved. It was an unsettled feeling and a far cry from that first flush of excitement.

You think Lovely, I've got a place! and you see yourself with your letters and all you're going to do. And then your sort of time comes along, the realities of the second year. The realities of what are you going to do when you've finished start to crop up as well, which I think was probably something to do with our February down.

The doldrums mood was widespread. Pam sensed it chatting before sessions and in the coffee bar. Her particular friend had left which made matters worse: she had found the first year hard going and then had problems with the examinations. Pam began the second year without her. She said she felt on her own then. I reminded her of the downside of company, the comparisons and talk of grades. Pam agreed. That was still there, but, on the other hand, being one of a crowd had its benefits.

When you're flagging, it's a good feeling to hear somebody who you think of as coping really well is flagging too. You think it's not just me.

We were doing a course of statistics in History. I'm really hopeless at maths, I always have this feeling that I never want someone to watch me while I'm doing it. I was firmly convinced that all the young ones from school must be at least able to do the basic things you see, so I'm thinking to myself, oh dear, this is going to be a disaster. I found that the young ones were no better than me in many cases. I was really surprised. We were meant to be helping each other. That was quite an eye-opener.

Pam found comfort in some comparisons. When the course seemed very hard, she would tell herself that she lived in the town, she had a car and she had no children at home to worry about. Others faced much greater problems. This second year her Mondays were free and she could stay at home and work. In college, talking in the coffee bar could put paid to whole mornings or afternoons. To keep herself going Pam used a rough system of rewards and penalties.

I'm going into town after this because I've been such a good girl. I handed in one History assignment last week and my statistics today. I regard the course as being full-time but flexitime you see, so, if I've been naughty, I make up the time at the weekend.

It had been a mistake in the first year to try to do everything, all the reading as well as the assignments. By now she had realised that she could not keep up with everything all of the time and had to be selective. Being swept along by the tide Pam related to being swept along by ideas. She talked about working on a History essay. In the lecture it all seemed clear but, when she began to read round it, there were so many sides to it.

I was getting into a terrible muddle and I'm not at all sure that I still haven't got a degree of muddle. I get a lot of satisfaction when I eventually sort it out. I'm getting a better feel of that sort of writing, which doesn't necessarily mean I can always achieve it.

Asked what the best thing about being a student was, Pam was in difficulty. There was nothing she was really thrilled about. The big step had been plucking up courage to take her A levels. She predicted a 2.2 for herself.

I'd like to think I could get a 2.1, but I'm not that good at the exams so, even if the assignments were about level, the other would drag me down. I mean you can't be too indifferent because otherwise what's the point of doing it at all?

She had thought about FE teaching and college arranged for her to spend a day sitting in on some classes. The young men in the afternoon group were different from what she had expected.

They didn't seem as though they were there to work. They were chatting and they weren't going to do what they were asked to do. Perhaps I'm putting myself down, but I didn't think I could cope with that sort of group. I was surprised to think that at seventeen and eighteen you had to say, "If you want to fight, go and do it outside." Slightly flattening really because everybody expects mature students, you know, to get career jobs after they've left and I had this as the long-distance sort of aim and all of a sudden I'm not sure whether I want to do it.

IVAN (replaced Jason)
(Mature: 16 A Level points)

We met again in late March 1991. It was a long session and was to be our last. Leaving Thames Polytechnic was still on his mind.

Partly I thought I should have stayed with that course. I still think I should have perhaps stayed with the course a bit longer, but partly I think I made the right decision, because it was English I wanted to do really.

Now he faced choosing his major.

I put down Sociology because I thought I was quite good at that, although I'm changing my mind a bit about it. It would be more useful vocationally, but recently I have altered my sense of priorities.

Almost randomly I hit on something, which persuaded me back into doing English which, when I think about it, relates to the main reason I came here in the first place.

That something, a book of critical essays on Conrad, had even inspired Ivan to talk of doing an MA in English.

The major will be English, the minor Sociology and you drop R and R. If you've got this idea of a major and a minor, you think I can't do too much of this or of that. I like the idea because you don't have to make a decision, take the responsibility for how you spend your time.

He talked at length about recently leaving a rock group he had joined in January. They practised every Wednesday in college, some first years and Dan from Spenser Road on drums. Ivan played guitar.

I walked into the sitting room and said, "I'm beginning to change my mind about carrying on," putting it in kind of non-committal terms. We talked about it for a bit and I got the impression that Dan was trying to encourage me to stay and I felt reluctant to be resolute about it.

I was talking about leaving the group and he (Andrew) said I should do what I wanted to even though I would hurt other people. I weighed it up and thought it would be worse to stay than lead them along, better to tell them.

I couldn't concentrate on my work inasmuch as I was thinking about it all the time. I didn't like producing a lot of noise. I wanted to make sure that we all knew what we were supposed to be playing. It was too unconditional, too spontaneous, for me to really get involved in it.

Ivan liked to know what he was doing. The best thing he had done academically was a tutorial on race and mental illness. It was not graded but he had researched it well. At the other extreme, not doing the reading for an R and R seminar had left him feeling down.

I felt I didn't have a reason to be at college if I hadn't read the material and I didn't have an opinion on it. I didn't feel I was capable of analysing it in any way and I thought I was inferior to everyone else intellectually.

In fact, he was doing quite well with an average in the middle 50s. For his last Sociology essay he got 67. Ivan went regularly to the lectures and seminars and felt he should both cover the set reading and pursue things that particularly interested him. He also felt that he should read thoroughly and he enthused about the Conrad book.

On the second reading I could actually understand it, on a logical as well as an intuitive level, and that made Conrad seem more dynamic, interesting and exciting. If I hadn't stumbled across this book then I wouldn't have found out all this extra stuff so I've really got to the realisation that it's a lot to do with me to make the course interesting. I've got to go out and find it.

What he thought he should be doing preyed on his mind as a permanent sense of guilt.

I try and do it but sometimes it gets too obsessive, I know sometimes you get too - You can't do too much work and I don't do too much! I kind of think about it too much.

Leaving the others to go and work in his room gave him a different sense of guilt. Sometimes Ivan stayed up late, sometimes he rose early. Working with a friend helped.

With someone else in my room, I worked really well. Everyone else was asleep and we seemed to work really well, mainly because working by yourself, your thoughts tend to wander about a bit.

Working like that, alongside someone else in the house, was rare. Next year the person he could work with was

moving back into college (Andrew), something Ivan himself would not contemplate.

Miss him? Yeah, yeah. This is it really, yeah. So I'll have to like bother someone else and go to somebody else's.

"Bother someone else" - Ivan was on the social fringe but, thinking about the best thing he had done, he had said,

I suppose it's divided up academically and socially. Socially I think it was getting to know the people in the house I live at, Spenser Road.

Ivan said he valued their company, but communal living was fraught with dilemmas for him.

Somebody in the sitting room said, "Why don't you just put everything in the bath tub?" I didn't really want to and I said, "Well I'd rather go out to the launderette". I was walking along thinking I could have stayed in and talked to everybody and put all my stuff in the bath.

I've had to compromise in terms of doing things, but also compromise in terms of not doing things, perhaps putting your foot down, things like doing the washing up. People are sometimes over fastidious about the finished result. They complain and I think it's unnecessary. You have to decide whether or not they're being malicious or they really are pedantic or whatever.

He told me that they liked to scapegoat people. They might, for example, talk about "a guy who does not do the washing up properly" and start joking about him.

A lot of school mentality is with them still. I feel I've a bit more grown out of it, but then again it's a phase they've got to go through. I find - well, it's a phase I missed out on really so I'm reliving that phase in a way.

Ivan said he had not really known anybody at his VI form college. "School mentality" was having a laugh and doing the minimum work.

I feel I'm being swept along with what other people think in our house. People start talking about things I don't necessarily agree with and I find myself agreeing in order to maintain good relations with everyone.

He told me that he fitted in with their image of him, as one of them but a bit vague, a dreamer.

I'm pretending I'm going about with my head in the clouds not really knowing what I want to do and then, when I get into my room, I get on with my work and put this image of I don't really know what I want to do with myself aside.

How can I keep hold of this thing I don't want to lose, this intellectual enthusiasm, and still talk about all these trivial things? It seems like if I do that I'll be a hypocrite and yet everyone thinks I'm really snobby if I don't and so I can't win.

Ivan saw himself as more serious-minded than the others.

But that's a fault as well as an advantage, just as their banter is a fault as well an advantage. I might think about things more, but it's a fault because I don't get involved more, and their kind of talking is a fault because they don't think about things, but an advantage in that they do get involved more. So I see it more as equal and I don't see that I should be stigmatised for my faults any more than anybody else should be for their faults. I do find it easy to detach myself and think about things, erm purely because I find it hard to do the opposite.

It's not so much the logic of what they're saying that's important as the kind of tone of the conversation. I find it's almost as difficult maintaining like a positive tone as arguing logically.

I think there's a lot more to lose getting involved in everyday conversations than they make out. It appears to them as if I'm just not bothering when I'm making much more of an informed decision than I think they realise, judging by the extent to which they seem to belittle my decision not to get involved in everyday conversations. It's just, I find it difficult this communication block, but they don't understand why I don't get involved in it.

I mean I have thought - Right, I'm going to come out with something which I know everyone wants to talk about and I'll say something like, "Erm, so what was it about, what was it about that went on down the bar the other day?" It sounds like I'm just thinking it up and it's like method acting or something and it sounds so, it's so contrived.

A lot of the time I see everything as work. I see like going into the kitchen and talking to people as work.

I pointed out the link between 'work' and 'effort'.

Yeah Exactly! Yeah, yeah exactly! A lot of the time I find it easy just to like read - yeah, exactly, yeah - and then when you have made the effort to go out and talk to somebody, then you can do a lot of work because it's almost the other way round with me. I see real work as like going out and talking to people and like the relaxing work is reading the books. Yeah exactly yeah!

There's no structure with what constitutes the right answer in a sense in a socially dynamic situation. You have to analyse it and really work it out and think like who's saying what? It's like reading five different novels at the same time and you think right, this is this person, that is that person, it's like all the characters in a novel. So you go, "Right, this person's saying that, that person's saying that. Right, OK, so how do I fit in?" You analyse it. What's my character going to be?

Ivan found it hard to fit in.

I find it awkward going home just because I think they've got their own routine. I find it awkward fitting in with that so I don't really like it that much.

I usually find it difficult coming back after going home as well so I try and do as much as I can during the holidays, I try and do as much work as I can during the holidays, college work.

For the next year four of the group planned to move to another house together, one was going into college, and Ivan expected to be with the two others. He said he looked forward to being in a smaller, less noisy group.

In fact, Ivan left in May, packed up and went without telling anyone. Dan said it had been building up since Easter. He would sit with them in the living room, but was very bothered because he was not working. Two weeks before he left, his bicycle and the precious guitar he had had since his early teens had both been stolen. He went back to live with his parents and found work in a library. The Spenser Road group invited him back to a house party at the end of term, but he phoned up at the

last minute and said he had lost his railway ticket. Dan arranged to meet him at a Pop Festival, but again Ivan cried off at the last minute. He was invited back to the Christmas Ball. Again he declined. It seemed as though he wanted to cut off his links with the others, but in 1994 he telephoned Dan just to exchange news. He was living in a flat and had a job in government service. Like Jason he left. Unlike Jason he turned full circle.

Me along with the others brought him out a bit. I don't know whether he wanted that. (Dan May 1991)

He was so different from everyone else in the house. We were all trying to help him. We deliberately dragged him into our circle and tried to involve him so he didn't feel isolated and, in the end, that turned out to be the worst thing we could have done, because he didn't feel isolated at all. He was perfectly happy sitting in his bedroom reading.

(Andrew Nov 1991)

Overdraft? Not massive but it might be after the Easter holiday. You can cope with that. It's easier than coping with the tension that actually drove Ivan out in a way. (Dan March 1992)

CHAPTER TEN

ROUTINES AND REALISATIONS

Given what emerged about the importance of friends, the third interview schedule shifted the focus from the course to the informal. Informants were now more than half way through their college careers and so prompts were set in the context of a journey, inviting accounts of times when they felt alone or in good company, when the going was tough, when they were being swept along, when they felt a strong sense of direction, and so on.

The idea of travelling with others experiencing the same trials is commonly expressed in the phrase "all in the same boat". Mark used it. Freshers were "all in the same boat, totally unsure about the place". Martin said that people would come up to him with, "We're all in the same boat. Where are you from? type of stuff". Thinking that others share your worries helps. However, "all in the same boat" can hide more than it reveals, give a false sense of uniformity of struggle. Martin was in the same place as Mark. They were both in residence at Polhill. But they were not in the same boat if that means sharing the same worries. Mark found a "circle of friends" who gave him the "good laff" he sought. Martin, on the other hand, was "not a great socialiser" and found it a strain to have "so many people to say Hello to". The challenges of social exposure take different forms.

With the passage of time, differences in the challenges informants faced did not lessen to make "all in the same boat" more enlightening. Like "the student experience" (pace CNA 1992, Roberts and Higgins 1992), "the same boat" is not a very illuminating phrase at the level of individuals. As the previous commentary illustrated in describing the tensions of academic exposure, individual problems did not converge in the second year.

The second term of the second year was a particularly tough period for most of the informants. They were not having the "comparatively easy time" to which staff referred; neither were they enjoying more "space and time". They were in the doldrums. It was a wearisome period of inner conflicts and doubts. Pam talked of "our February down" and found consolation in the thought that even the successful, those who seemed to her to be so much more confident and able than she was, were finding it hard to keep going too:

it's a good feeling to hear somebody who you think of as coping really well is flagging too. You think it's not just me.

It was not just weariness. There were doubts about where they were going and whether the journey was worthwhile:

there seemed to be a general sort of flat feeling... almost am I doing the right thing? You're half way through but you've got half way to go and you've got a whole load of assignments... The realities of what are you going to do when you've finished start to crop up as well. (Pam)

Emma echoed the feeling of overload and unease:

The second term was, I don't know what happened, but we seemed to be feeling a bit low with the course. A lot of people were having thoughts about why they were here, just thinking we didn't know what we were doing, where we were going... They'd given us an awful lot of work to get on with and it seemed never ending... It was like you just work, work, work and no sort of fun really. I've just had to knuckle down and get things done.

"Knuckling down" and trying to sustain a working routine was Emma's answer to the second year doldrums. Dan found that difficult. A heavy workload did not spur him on:

loads of assignments to do but you can't be bothered to sit down and do them, and you wonder what you're doing it all for anyway.

Workload is a deceptive concept. According to Andrew you could "get by doing the minimum". Gill said that people could "scrape through and not do an awful lot". It was up to individuals. "You can actually make it as hard as you want to."

It was hard for Dan but not in the way that Gill meant. What had made it particularly hard for him was the way he had responded to social exposure when he arrived. His problems stemmed in large part from that. His choice of friends and the strength of his commitment to them did nothing to encourage him to knuckle down and get things done. Talk of a "Mickey Mouse" course in the house helped undermine what will to study Dan had. It was not his conscious choice to be idle. He fell into a rut, a slough of despond which he certainly did not enjoy and from which he could not escape unaided. He was overtaken by lethargy and for a time he was missing practically all his lectures; staying in bed late, going to the pub and wandering around in the town.

When you get into a routine of doing that, it's really bad. You find it difficult to pull yourself out of it. (Dan)

Dan's hopeless routine was extreme. In Spenser Road he was "the dolite". It became clear that Andrew and Ivan had talked of Dan as an example of someone who was not making a success of college. Dan himself attributed his idleness to the example of the others in the house.

I think if it was just me doing it, I wouldn't have been in the rut so long.

Dan's friends were his "greatest achievement". He said they "kept him going". But they did not help him out of his rut when things were "really bad". The intervention of a tutor and his display of anger did that. Living with his friends reinforced Dan's disaffection with the course and his weakness of will.

I often feel I've been just swept along by what everyone else wants to do... I wish I had a bit more willpower about me.

It had started in the first year with the parties and the drinking games around the blocks at Polhill. There was a "feeling of commitment to the other people" and not joining in with everything they did would have made Dan seem "a bit funny". He had enjoyed those times but they had caught up with him now.

Living with friends in Spenser Road, Andrew too started the second year with high hopes but it did not last. He even felt like "getting away from everyone and giving up on Bedford College".

I was in a house where noone did any work. Ivan tried, but he was the only one and it forced him to leave in the end... It was the same sort of problem that I had. I said I felt undisciplined. Well, he felt the same. Spenser Road got to me, but it got to Ivan a hell of a lot more.

I did take a wrong turn by allowing my life to get out of control again... Here I am at the beginning of the third year and I've just wasted one. (Andrew)

Such realisations are indicators of the distancing that can presage a transformation in outlook and behaviour. In the previous interview Andrew had talked about Ivan as someone who was getting the most out of college. Andrew and his friends thought that they were helping Ivan "out of his shell" and that he was "really enjoying himself". In fact, the tension between wanting to be one of the group and not wanting to lose his hold on the course troubled Ivan so much that he left without completing the second year.

You can't do too much work and I don't do too much!
I kind of think about it too much... I've had to
compromise... I feel I'm being swept along with what
other people think in our house. (Ivan)

Yet Ivan, like Dan, saw his relationship with the others
in the house as an achievement. Asked about the best
thing he had done since becoming a student, he said:

I suppose it's divided up academically and socially.
Socially I think it was getting to know the people
in the house I live at, Spenser Road.

The division is too simple. The social and the academic
interconnect, affecting a person's routine and sense of
self-worth. Ivan's challenge was not straightforwardly
to reconcile his social life and his academic work, the
person is in both. He was different from Dan in that his
social life was itself a struggle. It was a struggle for
him to relate to the group whose friendship he avowed to
prize so highly and to find his place in it. The ledge
of social exposure was particularly precarious for Ivan
and those he had attached himself to unwittingly made it
the more so. Their banter was hard to understand, hard
for him to negotiate and hard to accept.

I see real work as like going out and talking to
people... there's no structure with what constitutes
the right answer in a sense in a socially dynamic
situation. (Ivan)

Ivan liked order: he felt uncomfortable in a rock group
because it was "too unconditional, too spontaneous".

A feeling of not being in control was common among the
informants although the circumstances which gave rise to
the feelings and the associated challenges were varied.
"Tell me about a time when you felt you were just being
swept along" was a fecund prompt. Informants' accounts
related variously to the perceived workload, to feeling
at sea with academic ideas and language, to trying to
fit in with others and balance demands, and to a sense
of aimlessness and feeling lost. Ivan was lost in the
conversations in the house. Efforts to rehearse his
words fell flat. He could not penetrate their talk. It
was another world of meaning.

It's not so much the logic of what they're saying
that's important as the kind of tone of the
conversation. (Ivan)

The rough and tumble affection behind the noisy fault-
finding and insults bandied about by young males passed

him by. For him there was "more to lose getting involved in everyday conversations than they made out".

I don't see that I should be stigmatised for my faults any more than anybody else should be for their faults...

A lot of school mentality is with them still. I feel I've a bit more grown out of it, but then again it's a phase they've got to go through. I find - well, it's a phase I missed out on really so I'm reliving that phase in a way.

Ivan had "grown out of" a phase which he had "missed out on really", a phase people had "got to go through". This contradictory observation said something about over-tidy views of human development as well as Ivan's confusion. He was pretending and "could not win". Trying to cope with the pressures of academic exposure and the often conflicting demands of social exposure was too much for him. There was nowhere to hide except behind a mask.

Martin found informal socialising a strain but not to the extent that Ivan did. It was the formal language of college that Martin could not fathom at times:

I feel part of it sometimes, but I don't feel part of it a lot of the time, coming from something that's very close-knit... It's me being taken along with the tide rather than being in control.

Martin was at sea with academic language and ways of thinking, one of the challenges of academic exposure, and that reflected on the person, not just the student.

I have various quaint descriptions of things which people laugh at and I wonder whether that's undermining my point of view. (Martin)

Martin needed and found support. Tutors were his "good company", the counsellor helped him feel better about himself and the students he associated with were serious about the work. A very significant contingency was meeting Sarah, his greatest support. She listened to his ideas and encouraged him to focus his assignments. They were living out together.

Where students lived was an important factor in whether they felt in control. Emma said she had not realised how important. She had moved from a cold, inconvenient house into a better one where another student resident was making it very hard to work.

Nicola kept the support of her friends from the first year, but was not, as she put it, "forced" to see them by living with them:

the Caves Lane bunch again. I'm a terrific worrier and so if there's any problems I'll be going down to where they live now and they'll help me out... If I lived in George Street (with them) I think I'd be tempted to stray from my work.

Nicola had stayed in Caves Lane where she had her own room with a desk. She made a point of telling me that in George Street they used their dining room table. Nicola liked her "own space".

A sense of being in control also marked what Gill said. She moved out from the marital home for a while.

Actually, for the first time probably, I'm not manipulated by people. (Gill)

This was a good in vivo indicator of transformation. Becoming a student had brought the tensions in Gill's marriage and in her family to the surface: it was the best thing she had done. At first she had "steered away from gender, feminism, that kind of thing", and kept her academic and personal life apart. Now she was facing personal exposure and the implications that new insights bring. It was a risk and she needed the support of other students and tutors, Linda in particular. Martin had his hero in Dr Dixon. Gill said of Linda: "absolutely wonderful we all think". She asked Linda to tutor her special study in the final year - on a feminist topic. Gill had found her main path.

The phrases informants used to describe what they were doing and where they were going were revealing:

I'm just buying a bit of time like. (Dan)

What I'm trying to do is just keep a hold on the course. (Emma)

I seem to be moving along more steadily towards the degree, which is what I'm here for really. (Andrew)

I feel pleased with what I've done... I've changed since I've become a student... a development of my own ideas. (Nicola)

Achieving I think, going somewhere... It's opened lots of new doors, new avenues for me, just how I approach life. (Gill)

'Buying time', 'holding on', 'moving steadily towards the degree', 'changing', 'development of my own ideas', 'achieving', 'going somewhere', seeing 'new avenues' and altering one's 'approach to life' indicate, however imprecisely, a kind of progressive difference between taking a course in an external sense and being affected as a person. Gill expressed that difference in the phrase "coming from the inside". Earlier in the course her high marks were in Sociology. It was a matter of "reading her bits", "doing her notes" and working to "that system" but it did not become part of her.

I started off high with Sociology but now I actually feel that the English is coming from the inside.
(Gill)

When understanding and motivation are coming from the inside the whole person has been touched. There is no need for the tutorial display of anger that jolted Dan out of a rut or for self-set but external inducements like trips to town with which Pam rewarded herself. Talk of being "naughty" or a "good girl" is the language of **external control and compartmentalisation of experience. Both are incompatible with transformation.** Gill no longer kept her college course as something apart when she accepted the reality of gender and power issues in her own life, when she began to take control of her life and probably for the first time was not manipulated by others. Her phrase "coming from the inside" shows the **connection between personal exposure and transformation.**

'Transformation' is a general descriptive and evaluative term. In Strauss and Corbin's (1990) language, it is the outcome of "selective coding" which follows "axial" and "open" coding. Open coding is the initial step in sense-making. In this case concepts like 'decision', 'break', 'routine', 'transition', 'priority' and 'balance' have been used. Axial coding relates in particular to 'social exposure', 'academic exposure' and 'personal exposure'; the circumstances surrounding the different challenges individual informants faced, how they responded and the consequences of those responses. The meaning of 'axial' is interconnectedness. The degree to which informants were transformed was connected to how they coped with exposure and that depended not only upon their character and ability but also upon their circumstances and, in particular, on the support that others gave them.

Stories from the house that "got to" Andrew, helped to reduce Dan to a "dolt" and was instrumental in Ivan's early departure showed how hard it was to keep going in a situation antithetical to the course. Loyalty to the others in the house had been built up during a first year spent savouring the new licence of studenthood. In

the second year the tensions in and between social and academic exposure and the feelings of guilt were intense and harder to handle than student penury. Serendipity was a key factor in survival. Dan was lucky to have David Hewitt to give him "the kick" he needed to get out of his rut. Andrew was helped by his girlfriend wanting more of his time. It turned into "suffocation" but at the outset her demands helped him distance himself from the Spenser Road group.

Martin lived on site in the first year but he was not drawn into a group of young males. He said that he had left many of their attitudes behind and was at college to work. However he was nervous in company and insecure academically and needed support and a measure of good fortune. He sought the help of tutors, the counsellor and serious students, but the most significant turn of events was his relationship with Sarah. She became his greatest support and his emotional rock. Moving out to live with her meant that his informal transition from the first to the second year was easy and positive.

Gill put work at the centre but, like Martin, was troubled by her lack of an academic background. She sought help from tutors, the counsellor and from fellow students. Fortunately the group of students to whom she related had the experience, the concern and the means to give her emotional support and practical help. They kept her going through her marital problems and through the punishing academic workload she set herself.

Of the informants Gill and Martin were the least well qualified for entry in traditional paper terms. They both had a strong commitment to the college and the course but they both needed sympathetic help and good fortune. Keeping going through the second year was not easy for any of the informants, the most committed and, on A level results, the most able included. Andrew, who had turned down a university place, felt like giving up. Ivan, transferred in from a polytechnic, left. Emma, who turned down a polytechnic place, was "keeping a hold" on a course which was "basically drudgery". Because French was her major Emma was to spend the next year in France. She said it would be "quite a shock". In fact it was to be a helpful change of circumstances.

Nicola seemed to have fewest problems. Hurt by poor A Level results, she was a "terrific worrier" who wanted to succeed. The support of friends made the difference and she saw them as she needed to. Being independent, a short walk from them, was a good arrangement and she knew it. Nicola was nervous but in control.

Pam came with two good A levels and was living at home. Her circumstances seemed ideal and yet, flagging under a "whole load of assignments", she began to doubt whether she was doing the right thing. The course seemed to be an endurance test as "the realities" of life after college loomed larger. People would expect her to find a "career job". She was not sure she wanted to or whether she could cope if she did.

In general there was little evidence of an increasing sense of direction in the second year. Having to choose a major subject was a salutary reminder that the course was entering its final phase but beyond graduation the informants entertained vague possibilities rather than clear aspirations. What they said about themselves and others indicated how common doubt and disillusionment were. **The big task was to keep going under a weight of self-doubt and work.** Contrary to the impression given by staff of an idyllic time, the second year workload could be oppressive. Some students, like Gill, set their own tough workload. Even those taking a "Mickey Mouse" course who felt they should be "made to" do more were oppressed by guilt.

These informants were in the same college taking the same degree. Structurally, the hurdles they faced were the same. Their histories, their circumstances and the challenges they faced were different. Their educational development or transformation was proceeding at varied rates and it was taking forms which are not easily translated into statements of behavioural objectives or, in contemporary terms, measurable competences.

Data showed the importance of individual circumstances, contingencies, reference groups and significant others. Feelings of anxiety and guilt were surprisingly common and there were patterns which could be worth exploring in further research. The young males seemed to be having an especially difficult time in their shared house. Their commitment to the group and to what the head of student services had called "street credibility" made them vulnerable and their seeking out of constructive help less likely. The staff's suggestion that mature females needed to keep their anxiety over work and grades in proportion was also supported in the stories these informants told and could be worth further work.

Although, in line with what the careers adviser had said, there was little evidence of informants having a clear sense of direction for life after college, an increase in their personal **reflectiveness** could be seen. This reflectiveness has been linked to '**personal exposure**' and '**transformation**'. Further exploration of these concepts informed the fourth and final interviews

which took place towards the end of the course or after it had finished.

'Personal exposure' means facing oneself and taking a realistic look at one's abilities, achievements and possibilities. It leads to wholeness, to casting aside pretence, to leaving behind the false attribution of personal failures to others, to taking control of self.

Transformation is a process and an achievement. Here 'transformation' is used to refer to how the informants changed and to the process of growth they underwent in coping with social and academic exposure and especially as they risked personal exposure. Indicators of their transformation could be seen in their realisations of past errors and present realities, in their achievement of personal control, in their acceptance of self and of responsibility.

Each final interview was a culmination, a conversation built on mutual trust. Informing themes were struggles, conflicts, successes, failures and personal change, ie the process and demonstration of transformation. A list of items for students to look through was not provided. The conversations were open explorations, back-tracking to previously reported events, episodes and encounters where appropriate, looking for **hurdles, turning points, lessons learned**, and times of overcoming and succeeding. The events and the people that played a significant part in the processes of transformation were of particular interest.

By this stage the student informants had become research collaborators in a full sense. Our final conversations were to be an assessment of the past and present and a looking forward to future plans, hopes and aspirations. Key ideas were personal awareness and independence, evidence of change, reality of aspiration and the preparation for letting go. An outline of the form the interviews took is given on the next page.

FOURTH INTERVIEWS: 1992 and 1993

There was no set schedule issued in advance, but a loose agenda for me to have to hand:

- 1 What would you say was the biggest hurdle you faced in settling down as a student?
- 2 Have there been any major turning points while you've been here?
- 3 What do you think the best part of it has been?
- 4 What has taught you the most?
- 5 Who has been of most help to you?
- 6 Has anything held you back? How?
- 7 What's the worst thing been about being a student?
- 8 Do you have any plans now? How are they going?
- 9 What do you feel most pride in and most disappointed about?
- 10 How have you changed?

I used the lubricant probes, What? Who? When? Where? How?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FINAL YEAR INTERVIEWS

NICOLA

(6 A Level points)

Our final interview was in May 1993. For her year in France Nicola had rented a place in Cannes with two other girls, one English, the other American, but it was difficult living with them, the American in particular. "We had to live basically around her." She said she learnt how hard it could be living with strangers. Her relationship with the landlady was good however, and she got on well with her students at school and with the surveillants. As part of her placement, she took about six students at a time for English conversation.

I didn't spend much time at home. I got on with the students so well that I'd spend time with them. At French schools they have pupil surveillants. They take registers and they're there to help students if they have any problems outside school or problems with teachers. They're in between teacher and student, sort of link the teachers and students. They're from university and they were my age and I got on well with them. I had the special study to do as well, that took up quite a bit of time.

The year in France was "dramatic". It had taught her a lot about herself, not least that she could be alone and, in some ways, that she was better off on her own. Her boyfriend had visited her but that was over now.

I've got a lot of enthusiasm for life whereas he's sort of plodded on. I wanted someone around me that, I dunno, wants to attack life. He won't attack life. I felt quite restrained having him around so I'm quite glad, happier.

Settling back to Bedford had not been hard.

Cannes was fantastic, but the atmosphere here is so personal. I know there are other places, like my sister's at Bristol, very impersonal there, but this college is so close, it's a great atmosphere.

Her close friends had left. Two of her original friends were now local primary teachers and kept in touch. Both had invited her into school. In college Nicola teamed up with two girls who had also spent a year in France. They talked work through together. Nicola still needed people as listeners to help overcome the problems she had with repeating herself and muddling her ideas. To clear her

mind and reassure herself, she would read parts of her draft assignments to the first years in the Caves Lane hostel where she was once again based. She said she remembered her own early days there when she forced herself out of her room to meet the others and felt as if she was listening in on private conversations. She had no problems like that now. Leading discussion groups was however different.

In the new modular degree the group sizes had gone up and so had the expectation of student-led work. Nicola was faced with taking seminars:

20, 25, 30. When it comes to a group like that, I'm a bit scared about talking to people of my own age. We're looking at the ideas of Koestler and Kaffka. I've got quite radical ideas myself, but I get muddled because I find it difficult to stop and think before I talk. When I talk I repeat myself quite a lot and I don't like to have any gaps. I like to be talking all of the time.

She had recently had an interview for teacher training. Waiting her turn, waiting for the interviewer to finish looking through the papers and say what she had to say before jumping in herself had been hard to handle.

You know how I plunge into things. I plunge into my essays too much. I don't think I'm very mature in the way I express my views and that scares me a lot, but I think that will come in time, well I hope it will come in time.

I reminded her of the problem she had with taking notes, copying far too much out of books.

I can skim through and grab the necessary parts from a book. **It just came.** I think it just developed. Before, I had to read a book thoroughly and then read it again, but now I can pick up what the **writer's saying quite easily.**

Nicola had maintained momentum. Taking French helped, the shorter language assignments balanced out heavier demands in literature and English.

I've enjoyed French, I've learned a lot of French, but **I've learned a lot about life when it comes to English.** There's a moral message in most books that you read so I've learned a lot from the literature side.

I asked her what she took most pride in and she said not being in debt. She went on to say that the best thing

was that her mind had developed. Her ideas were firmer now. If rushing in was her problem, it was not apparent when I asked how she would describe her ideas.

It's difficult when you ask a direct question like that. I find it worrying to put things in boxes. I'm left wing, but it's difficult to say because 'left wing' can encompass many things.

I'm lucky enough to come to higher education so I'm quite middle class in that way. But if you look at finance, perhaps working class.

I reminded her that in the first year she had talked about people from school "being dumped in a job for the rest of their lives" when they could spend a few more years learning so much about the world. Nicola had wanted her brother to go to college.

I've changed, because, although I think some people do feel that education's what they need at the age of eighteen, for other people - I think perhaps, if we lived in a society where it was accepted to go out into the working world and then come back into education at the age of thirty say, I think they'd appreciate the education a lot more. I suppose, rather than looking at the whole life as a student, I'm just looking at the education itself.

The single-mindedness of the matures, the cavalier attitude of some young students, and her experience in France had given Nicola food for thought on the nature of the processes she was going through herself.

Nicola said her mother was her greatest support and that her family had remained a strong influence. She had applied to Manchester Airport for vacation work. Her brother had left school and worked there. Her sister was filling in time before starting a PGCE. In September Nicola had applied for secondary teacher training but conversations with BEd students at Bedford and seeing children in college and in schools had caused her to rethink. By the time she registered her change of mind to primary teaching it was too late.

Bedford's full so I was too late, which I was really frustrated about. Obviously it's my own fault.

The week before we met she had been interviewed for a place at Milton Keynes, an BCHE outpost course. That was doubly oversubscribed and she was not confident about the interview. She was waiting to hear.

I asked what class of degree she expected to get.

Although I want to be ambitious and say yes, I'd like to have a 2.1, to be realistic I'll probably get a 2.2.

She did. The following term she started teacher training on a secondary PGCE at a northern university.

DAN
(8 A Level points)

It seemed sensible to meet again before the pressures of final assessments and so the last interview was in March 1992, near the end of Dan's penultimate term. He was living with friends in a house near Polhill. History was his major and he was happy with his choice. He was not doing paid work during the term. Looking back, what was the **biggest hurdle** he had to face?

I suppose it was leaving home and my friends and coming to somewhere where I didn't know anyone. I wondered whether it was really what I wanted to do.

At school there were two groups, those going to college and his group, who were looking for jobs locally. Dan unexpectedly found himself going to college. His parents drove him down and his mother had fussed around with things like hanging clothes up. He wanted them to go:

just to be left, to think about my situation and get things into perspective because everything was happening at once in a totally new environment.

At first he was sharing. When the other student moved out, Dan had felt very low. Then came a **turning point**.

A couple of **my mates** came down from the Tower and **asked me to go out with them** and that is the time I started really hanging around with them. I've realised now how important they were to me, my friends, I think that's the main part of college. There's been some points where, if I wasn't living with them in the house, it would have all got a bit too much for me. Some nights I've sat thinking about how much work I've got to do and what I'm going to do when I leave and it all gets too much sometimes. It's just talking about it even, because you go through it in your mind and it gets totally out of perspective.

What about his being unable to leave the group to study, the feeling of commitment to them?

I don't think it's as strong, there was more of a bond definitely, but if you see the other lads just having a laff and that in the house, I tend to go and join in.

If I could start college again? I think I've wasted time, just, you know, in bed. That's a regret. I could have been doing something, anything! I don't think it is just me, that's the only encouraging thing, because I've spoken to two people I lived with last year. **We're all more or less the same. It must have done something to us last year in that house.**

When I mentioned the heavy drinking and being swept along by the group, Dan said things were different now.

I think you're just trying to relive the first year if you go down the bar and do that. Now it's like as a sociable drink because you've done some work in the day and you reward yourself by having a couple of pints and a chat. Obviously it's not always like that, sometimes you go down the bar and have loads, if you've got an assignment done or something, but I feel I need to justify doing that now. In the first year and second year, you just do it.

I know I'm at the stage where it's crucial I get down to work. You can't just sit down and watch telly without thinking I should be doing some work.

How was his overdraft?

Not massive, but it might be after the Easter holiday. **You can cope with that. It's easier than coping with the tension that actually drove Ivan out** in a way. I bought a diary to get myself more organised. I thought it might help me because I wasted too much time sitting around listening to music or in bed or watching telly.

I always worry about this situation. I've worried about it in the past, about assignments and leaving them too late, but the thing is I always get them done in the end. I try to do assignments earlier but I need that pressure.

I think finish a side of A4, I can have a cigarette, but not before. That's some sort of incentive to do the work, but then you start thinking I need a cigarette. If you have a cigarette when you're really stressed out, just sit back and read the work, it sometimes gets it flowing.

That note from his History tutor cropped up.

I was thinking this is annoying me because it's like school, I've got to give excuses why I wasn't going to the lectures. I was trying to dodge him, it was a silly situation. He put that note in the pigeon hole. I had to go see him and he got really angry. I think that helped me a lot. You were talking about turning points, I suppose that was one.

I asked him about his special study.

You can go for the easy option and think I'll do a bit tomorrow and then find yourself with not much time left, which I didn't want to happen. I started really early in the end, about December, did quite a lot of work, but then rested because I knew I'd done some. Now I've started again. I don't think I've left it too late because I've still got five or six weeks. Once I get back to grips with it, I'll be OK.

I don't want to appear too sure or anything, but I think I'm heading for a 2.2. I'm just taking one step at a time at the moment, especially as there's still the exams. I know I should be trying for jobs now but I really have no idea what I want to do.

Best part of college? Definitely the social side. I've had a really good time. I've got no moans about it. If I left college without a degree I'd obviously be pretty upset but I wouldn't think I've wasted my time here. I'd think things have been worthwhile. I've developed as a person.

I asked what that meant.

I've definitely got more confidence in myself, not necessarily on the work side, but socialising. I've met a lot of friends here, the sort of people perhaps I wouldn't really have got to know at home.

I think I've learnt more about how to live. You know, I never realised, just stupid little things like organising yourself to do your washing and shopping, setting time aside to do things like that. It's not all just studying and going to lectures.

I think I've become more my own person like, because I've left my mum and dad, I left that sort of safe unit where I didn't really have to do much, think much for myself.

It's run its natural course, the friends and everything. I think it is time I moved on. I'll be

sad to leave all my friends and that, but I can just feel it in the air. I think it is time. We've done everything; we've done all the drinking, been to all the discos, had a good laff, lived together for two years. It just doesn't go on like that you know.

Staying in Bedford and living with students appealed to him. He could just relax in the evenings.

I thought that sounded pretty good. But then I was in the bar a couple of months ago and I saw this bloke; he's left the course, he just hangs around in the bar. To me he looks really out of place and I reckon that's how I'd be. You're just trying to hang on to something aren't you?

I feel really safe in it, but I know it's not real. It's not the real world. It's good at college, the atmosphere, everyone knows each other. In some ways it's really false though. It doesn't reflect what it's going to be like.

He said he would find work, pay off his overdraft, have a holiday and then start serious applications. Dan did not know what his ideal job would be, the main things were to be happy and to earn enough to live on. Going home was an option but there were snags.

They crowd me a bit. I especially take it out on mum. You know, I get really uptight and aggressive with her which I hate. She wants to do everything for me and we really fall out.

Dan got a 2:2 and stayed in Bedford doing casual work for a term sharing a house with some student friends. With hindsight he wished he had left straight away. It was not as enjoyable as he thought it would be, he was not part of the college. He went back to live with his parents after Christmas and was unemployed for some months before getting an office job with a glazing company. While he was unemployed he did some voluntary work in a local school and became interested in taking a primary PGCE. He could not get a place for 1994 but when I contacted him, he said was going to try again the next year. Four of his college friends had been to spend a weekend with him and Ivan had telephoned.

EMMA

(18 A Level points)

It was May 1993 when we had our fourth interview. Emma was living in hall at Polhill. I asked what the worst thing was about being a student.

I suppose I could say the money side, but I wouldn't say that's been the worst.

Sometimes I wanted to go home and I couldn't. Well, I could have done if I'd have wanted to spend extra, but I was really careful with my money. So far I've never really gone overboard and got huge debts or anything. I know a lot of people do but they seem to spend their money more easily. I mean they're not as strict as I was with myself.

Held me back? I'd really say insecurity, that's the big one. It's sort of fight with it all the time. One minute you're up there and you're getting on with things, a bit later on you could be feeling should I ring this person up? Should I do that? It's annoying. In me there's sort of a little battle going on: one side that wants to be out there doing things, and the other side that's oh, don't do that! People will laugh! and oh, they don't really want to be with you! It's getting a little bit more with the sort of going out there but even so that other side does prick me a bit, does set me back.

I asked about France. She had thought it would be quite a shock.

When I got there I was with a friend and I was very shy and let her do a lot of the talking. We lived in the same house with a really nice French family but it was quite expensive and Rachel decided, we'd met some other people and they'd seen a flat coming up and she thought she would go for that so I thought oh well, I'll stay. I came to an agreement with the landlord and the landlady and paid a bit less - best thing that could have happened because it made me, I had to speak at dinner times and you know I sort of came out of my shell.

She said that the biggest hurdle she had had to face when she first came to Bedford was not so much being away from home as finding new friends. Coming back after France was not like that.

I've made some new friends now actually, because a lot of them left. When you have been away and you've had to make friends for the year, coming back is not

such a big deal because you're speaking your own language.

In terms of getting through the course, she referred back to that second year slough, a time when people were wondering why they were here and becoming disillusioned. Drama seemed to have too few practical sessions and French was 'textbooky'. She had coped quite well in the end. Her grade for the film was not as high as she had hoped but she could see why from the tutor's comments. French had been better this year. The modular degree suited her, her work was better and it was good to continue with Drama. She was taking seven modules of French and four of Drama. She would have taken another practical Drama module but time-table clashes prevented it. That was the one snag.

I had to take an extra module to make it all match up so I took European Tourism. I didn't really understand what was going on. I'm sure the lecturer was very good but his style of teaching didn't seem to get through to me. My seminar went very badly. I've never done seminars before and that was a nightmare, but I did quite well with the folder I had to hand in.

Did she still do spidergrams?

Yes, I still do that, but now I cheat a little bit and take photocopies and go through them with a highlighter and then select. I photocopy the article and go through and pick out the main bits. It costs a bit, but it does seem to work.

She took most pride in her improved French and in her acting; she had been in another play at the community theatre. When I asked who had been most help, Emma talked about her tutors at Bedford, particularly one who had helped her sort out her future plans.

At the University of Tours, Emma's language skills had improved and she was able to interview people in French for her special study. She was especially proud that she had interviewed "the head of a very important television channel". **France was, she said, the biggest turning point, when she was on her own with the French family and relying on her own resources.**

There were a few cinema festivals which interested me for my dissertation so I started to go to those, pluck up courage and interview people, just general mixing and speaking French. Suddenly, you know, my **confidence started to get a lot stronger.** I could speak more French. I enjoyed it and I wasn't shying

away any more. I made friends I'm still in touch with. At Christmas I wasn't bothered when I had to stay at home because of my leg but at Easter I just went home for a week and couldn't wait to get back.

Emma had injured her leg working in a factory at home. I asked if she could think of a time when things had fallen into place, become clearer, and she said:

I suppose a lot of it is really from France. I just began to, I don't know, it probably sounds strange, but just sort of like me as a person. I had to face myself you know at points because I was on my own and then, through that, I was around people who were caring and so, because it gave me confidence, everything just seemed to fit in with me.

You had to face yourself?

WELL IT'S TRUE! I did. Particularly in the first term when I was living away I got quite homesick, that was the strange thing. I wasn't homesick when I was here so much, but, being in France, I knew I was a long way away and the culture and things. It sort of, you know, turned it in on me, and, as I say, I had to sort of face me.

I was annoyed at myself in a way. I was sort of sometimes, I'm quite shy still, still am now, but I also learnt there were good things about me as well: that I wasn't just - that I shouldn't just have a paper bag over my head, which sounds probably bizarre, but I really did think that was all I was worth. I really had a low self-esteem. Being around people who respected you, encouraged you, it just sort of changed things. I thought yes, I can do this! I can actually go and interview somebody in French and they'll listen to me and reply and they won't say, "Go away! Silly girl!" sort of thing you know.

She reflected on boarding school and college:

school was a very enclosed little society, little world. I suppose Bedford College is in a way. Then again you meet people from different backgrounds and you have more of a choice of who you can be with rather than being forced upon each other and having to make do and survive. A bit more freedom really. It's funny, people think you've gone away to school and you have all this confidence. You do in a way, but not necessarily you know. Sometimes people will knock it out of you. You can have it superficially at certain points but then really you've got to find

it in yourself. A good thing about being a student, I didn't mention that, is the fact that you realise that you aren't alone in what you've gone through, that's important. You find out that other people had this at school. They were feeling the same way - just to know that you weren't the only one.

I reminded her how the thought of going to a big city had worried her. She said she could probably cope now. Coming back to college from France had seemed to her like taking a half step backwards.

Emma had been to France again at Easter and had had a successful interview for a summer job at EuroDisney. Going on to Drama school would be too expensive and so she was going to enrol at an FE college near her home to take a secretarial qualification. She would have to find work to support herself while she was doing it but it would give her a skill to combine with French. She could then build up some cash.

She passed her degree with a good 2.1.

ANDREW

(20 A Level points)

The fourth interview was in March 1992. It was a long session in which the personal and social took over as he rehearsed the tensions between his need to belong and to break away, the balance between support and space. The course took a back seat. With hindsight Andrew felt that it had not been the right choice for him.

I didn't want it to be too hard, but I wanted it to be taxing. It's such an easy life here, far too easy. I don't even find myself worried, I just do it. It seems like I'm doing it with my eyes shut. I thought it was the right degree for me when I came, a broad-based degree that would function as a platform for what I wanted to do as a graduate rather than being specialised too early. But what it's turned out to be is an extension of my A levels. I've done three subjects in about as much depth as I did my A Levels, just in a different environment. The lecturers are different, the attitude's different, but basically all you do is briefly look at subjects here and there.

I don't think I've advanced very much, don't think I've done much worthy of note. I'll have a degree. I suppose that's something to be proud of, but it's not much of an achievement. Really it isn't. Let's face it.

I reminded him that his teachers at school had told him to lower his sights.

They did try and put you down. I don't know if they did it consciously or not but the teachers were patronising and condescending. They didn't do anyone justice, not just me. I think if I'd have left and got a job in that frame of mind, I could have been stuck. I needed to be liberated. I think that's what this place has done for me.

His father and stepmother were churchgoers and had taken Andrew with them until the struggle was lost. Their seven-year old daughter was their joy now. There was a lot of disapproving talk about the lives of the extended family and Andrew had wanted to get away.

I virtually revolted against my family and got as far away as I could. Now I've gone some way back. It's better, a lot better. We talk a lot more often. There's still restrictions on what we can speak about because he's a bit puritan in his ways and I'm not. When I say "puritan", I just mean he's a bit moralistic. He's got set things that are right and are wrong and, if I deviate from them, I get into a lot of trouble - money, drink, girls, all the normal things I suppose.

Andrew went home for just three days at Christmas. The previous summer he had found a job in Bedford and was still doing it. From Monday to Thursday he worked from 4pm to 8pm and there were no clashes with lectures.

On Fridays I start at three and finish at six and I have a lecture from two till three so I have to miss one now and again. Nicholas, the tutor, said if you need money you have to go. On a mundane level the worst thing about being a student is not having any money, having to go and earn it, and living in a place that gets so tedious it drives you insane.

Andrew was back living in college.

The ones that live in Newnham Avenue (including Dan) refused to move back for their third year because they can't stand it now. I think they're used to living out and they say what a close environment college is.

When I was a first year I used to see third years and think they looked like pathetic creatures walking around on their own and now I do exactly the same thing. I used to think where are their friends? Now I'm like it, sitting at dinner on my own, that

sort of thing. People probably look and say, "He's a bit sad. He's got no friends."

We talked about when he first came.

I used to hide in my room, cower in the corner, not speak, and if I went down in the bar, I'd stand on my own and not talk. I'm naturally shy I suppose, bit embarrassing, so I just kept myself to myself. **Making friends is definitely a hurdle. Very important.**

What had he learnt at college?

Be an individual. I haven't been able to do it and I've learnt that I should have. That's important. When I first came here I tried to conform to everybody else's patterns. That's why I started going out and getting drunk.

It was good fun going out and getting drunk and being very loud and loutish, but, at the same time, I like to be able to back off from them and let them do it by themselves - which is unfortunate. I don't do it ever any more.

Of the Spenser Road group, Ivan had left, two had moved into their own place, four were together in Newnham Avenue, and Andrew was on his own. He began to drift away from the group when he started spending more time with his girlfriend. She had brought more constraints.

She was so intense. I wasn't allowed to breathe in the wrong direction without her wanting to know why. It got to the stage where she picked me up from work and I resented it. I used to enjoy that half hour of quiet, walking home and thinking, not having to converse or do anything. I did try and talk her out of it. She couldn't understand it. So I mean it is lonely, but a **welcome loneliness** sometimes I think, sometimes not.

I can't relate very well to people, but I still like people. It's when I meet people that I like, I mean you as well, include yourself, people that I can meet and talk to. It doesn't happen very often.

The people he had met while he was at college had been the most helpful part of his student experience: people at work, other students, tutors, people he could relate to. There was particular praise for an English tutor.

Nicholas has had quite an effect on me because he's in love with books and it's taught me to appreciate

them more. And he's such a nice bloke, he has a chat with me after the lectures, just knowing that I'm interested in America. He's good because he takes notice of the students.

You've still got to have someone you can talk to. If this person is someone that you can call a friend then they probably understand that you like being on your own. It's just that sort of a relationship.

Andrew wanted his own space. Space to find himself?

I wrote a long story about this. I used the image of walking down a blind alleyway and there's turnings to the left and to the right. And if you turn left and go along it, there's another one to the left and to the right, and every one you choose, you're leaving one behind that you haven't explored. So I think whatever decisions you make in your life, you could always have gone the other way and you are never going to know about that side of yourself.

Was there an essential self, the real Andrew?

There probably is but I'll never be able to find it and I don't think I want to. I've come to the conclusion that, once you do that, there's nothing left, is there? No originality, no fun, nothing.

At least he could look back and see some wrong turnings.

Now is probably the best time I've had for looking back and seeing what I've done wrong: girlfriends, trying to get into a group I probably didn't belong in, choosing the wrong degree. I've made a lot of mistakes but I've still enjoyed it.

Sharon, that was the big turning point, because that cut off my freedom and then yesterday was another one perhaps.

Andrew had broken off the relationship with his "suffocating" girlfriend the day before we met.

I was hoping for Divine intervention, but it never came. I'd just had enough. I did it. Nothing happened. She said it was totally out of the blue. I was walking home from work, I was just fed up with going around putting a smile on my face, you know, pretending, so I decided I wasn't going to. I walked in and just let it all fall out.

Hopefully by the end of this term it will have sorted itself out with Sharon gone and I'm going to

America to enjoy myself. I feel good this morning. I felt a bit upset for her, but today I feel quite released.

Had he solved his problems now?

Just got some new ones. But it's all life isn't it? It's what it's all about. You have to learn. I'm only 21. I hope I'm a wiser person when I leave college. I don't think I've changed that much.

I suppose what I've learned here is that, in the end, you learn. With time you begin to see things differently.

Andrew's father had bought him an air ticket for his 21st birthday and he was going to New England, where he would visit Harvard. Studying film and visual arts there had crossed his mind, but he knew it was unrealistic. His chances of specialist training in England were equally slim and his competition entry to Anglia TV had come to nothing. He would finish his degree and take his time looking for a good opportunity.

I've still got a job so I'm not going to starve if I don't get one straight away. I can carry on with my job because it pays well even though it's only part-time. I can go and live with Mum if I have to.

She was on her own, her second marriage over.

Andrew got a 2.1 and carried on working in the factory canteen, sharing a house near college. In January 1993 he contacted me to talk through becoming a teacher. He thought it would be a realistic base from which he could build his interest in film. There was a new girlfriend, Mandy, a BEd, someone who "let him breathe". He went on to a PGCE at another college, living with Mandy, who taught nearby. They married in 1995.

GILL

(Mature: 0 A Level points)

The final interview was in July 1992. Gill was very different from the immaculately neat person I had first met. She lived alone in an annexe in the garden of a fellow student. The special study had developed into a study of French feminism and psychoanalytic theory and was completed. The dreaded written examinations had been deferred until September. Gill was doing part-time shop and bar work.

She had told me she was "ignorantly competent" before she came. Although she had forgotten those words, she said they were accurate. Her knowledge and confidence from other careers had evaporated when she started college. She had to learn to cope with new ideas and the demands of independent thinking. Early in the first term she switched from Geography to English.

I went to ask if there was any chance of me doing English and this maybe is where the **A Level stigma** or my own stigma started, because he said did I have an A Level English? And I said no, and he said, well, 99% of them did.

Facing deadlines, being put to the test, was stressful.

I do worry, I probably worry about doing well. I think that's the thing I want to do. I try, I have a battle inside myself that health is more important.

Driving herself on had made her ill and she had been prescribed antidepressants.

A total anxiety. I was sleeping for a maximum of four hours a night and I was burning off all this nervous energy, trying to sit there and create something, but I was having so many blocks. I was just sitting there for such long periods of time and nothing happened so that was doubly frustrating.

A lot of things were going on inside and that was when the pressure was absolutely building, trying to do my thesis. Everything became insurmountable at the end and I **cracked under the pressure**. I didn't see it happening until it was too late almost and then **Linda came over to see me during the Easter holidays at home**. One of the girls had rung her and told her that I was getting into a tizzy about this thesis. She came over and spent three hours.

The tensions were compounded by marriage problems.

That's not to blame my husband. It's just that, obviously, the worry was there on an emotional level, but it held me back because it drains you. You can't channel your energies and effort in the correct, the way that you would want to.

Had walking out been a turning point for her?

Certainly. I think if I hadn't been at college, if I hadn't had this experience, I might not have done it. It has changed me in the way that I view things. There's been pressures there and disharmony from the

word go in a way for me being at college. You know they haven't mixed very well.

The decision to defer the final written papers was painful but it gave Gill time to breathe.

That had to be a turning point and I think, under the circumstances, it was the only decision I could make, although making it was hard because it's going to be quite different for me sitting the exams on my own. And that, as you know, with my fear of exams, is a daunting prospect.

It was about two or three weeks before the exam. I was in quite a state and Linda said, "Come and see me," in a very kindly sort of way, "Just come and see me." And it all came out, how I felt, and she just gave that option, "If you feel fit enough then feel free to sit it, but the option's there." Then the lid was taken off me. I was able to breathe and let off steam. Up to then I thought if anybody put another brick on that lid I would have...

Deferring the exams was her biggest disappointment, worse than the domestic break-up. College had become that important.

One of the best things is the size of the college. The lecturers are accessible to you and it makes it a friendly, personal thing. That is what I needed. I don't think I would have done as well or survived as well in a big establishment.

What had taught her the most?

Maybe the other students I think. Communication. I quite liked people before and I liked communicating, but there's very much a bond and a closeness, particularly in the last year as it's coming to an end. One big thing I think I've learnt, it's expanded the way I sort of see people's space, very much so, respecting another person's space.

Being in close proximity with the other students and learning from them, it's taught me that other people have got to let people be free in a way, let them choose. They don't have to agree with you or you agree with them for it to be OK, that's what I mean.

Other mature students were a great support, especially Sheila and Ann, a "very positive force" who had given her somewhere to stay. The tutors were friendly too, particularly Linda. Her influence had been great.

Linda certainly, just generally through her teaching and her use of the language. It was there from when we first had her lectures in Drama. At first we couldn't understand her. We thought she was talking in Russian, we all did.

What was the best part of the experience?

Just the new eyes that it gives you. It opens them in fact to a whole world of things that I know if I hadn't embarked on this they would have been closed to all the time. It's almost like you're given a taste and now that I know, you can't close them again. It gives you an inquisitiveness and a questioning mind. It touches everything. It's back to the critical awareness. The word that frightened me is the thing that evolves over the course I think.

I've become more open-minded, more tolerant, tolerant of difference I think, of people's differences.

Had greater tolerance contributed to her leaving her husband? They were linked, she said, through feminism. Was she first drawn to Linda through feminism?

No I don't think I was. I think that's grown as well, definitely developed. I hadn't thought of feminism and that kind of issue. In the life I'd had, it wasn't important, it hadn't been brought to a head, whereas through this you start to think about it.

I am sociable and I am quite extravert and that hasn't changed. What it probably has done and you don't realise is confidence, it gives you that added inner confidence.

I reminded her of "the stigma" of having no A Level.

There's been a click since then. Something has happened without me realising I think. I can't say it was one day I wasn't and the next day - but now, looking back, I can see that something has happened. It's almost as if you don't notice it happening.

I feel totally encouraged by it. I found something in me that wanted to come out and I really enjoyed it, and I'm very proud of that because I never thought, starting on the English, I never dreamt that I would be anywhere.

There was still the final examination to face.

Ann said last night she'll have to escort me by the arm. She told my friend. She said, "Are you ready to take one arm of Gill? I'm going to take the other because I think we'll have to carry her bodily into the exam room." They will be around. But no, I will go, I couldn't not. Ideally I would love a 2.1.

She did get a 2.1 and a post working with young people on job placement. She found her own place to live and reverted to her maiden name. A part-time MA in Women's Studies was a possibility.

MARTIN

(Mature: 0 points)

We met in May 1992. The film he had been so proud of had been marked at a disappointing 53%. He went to see the tutor who was "very constructive". Martin said he could see now that the story line was predictable and the depiction crude. On the credit side, he told me about an English seminar on Pinter.

I've never spoken so much for ages and I enjoyed it, because I felt I put something in to the lesson. It's no good sitting there thinking I wish I'd said that. You can't relive the moment in time can you? So I have to steel myself.

Another success came when a History tutor was talking about company towns and said how much better off the workers were in them. Martin spoke up:

Yes, but wasn't it also a means of social control? And he stopped me in my tracks and said, "That's what separates the good historians from the bad historians." Two years of Bill Wright and that's the first compliment I've ever had!

His special study was on Henry VIII and the Duke of Norfolk. Having to get it typed, toing and froing with corrections, was frustrating but it was worth it.

I'm glad it's been typed because it looks nicer. It feels like you've almost written a book. After spending so many years reading what other people think, you think I've got mine now! It's a totally selfish kind of feeling.

I'm not an excellent student by any means, but I'm not a dope. I'll probably end up with a 2.2. I don't think that's bad.

People say I've changed a lot. They say I'm more outgoing. I don't know. I don't see any great change. I'm a little bit more confident now, not much, just enough to get by.

He had stopped seeing the counsellor.

It reached the point where we had discussed all about me. I don't want to be clinical, but it had come to the end.

For a self-confessed worrier he had surprised himself.

At the start of these exams, I don't know why, but I became the calming influence rather than the one who was rebounding off the walls. These mortified expressions, not everybody, but very good students, they get good marks. I thought well, if they're like that, what should I be like?

One of the biggest things that has helped me is seeing how many people are in the same boat as me as a student, going into the classes and things to try and do this degree, how many people are working from the financial basis of a grant, sort of kindred spirits if you like.

Even though they have got these qualifications they still feel insecure about answering some questions in the lesson.

What was the biggest hurdle, the greatest challenge?

Definitely the special study. It was sort of own up time, you've learnt all these techniques throughout the three years, basic principles of taking an historical opinion and looking at documents and trying to organise something.

I chose History because there's all this critical theory in English I can't really get to grips with, Marxist theory and Freudian theory. I don't know whether it's my upbringing but I couldn't take it seriously. If you had asked me if I was majoring in History in the first year I would have laughed, but I thought you're supposedly dealing with facts here. It's not Gradgrind type of facts but it's tighter. Most of my English essays do have this wandering sensation all the way through them.

The next big transition was what to do next. Martin did not know. A lot depended on Sarah. She was his rock, the level-headed organiser. He told me how she had helped him over his panic when his grant cheque was late.

My grant cheque's been here every term. It's arrived and I go and collect it off Beryl, "Ah yes. Here you are." And it didn't arrive! O my God! Out of all the terms, it didn't arrive on the last one. O No! I sort of crawled into a little ball for about two days and then Sarah sat me down and said, "It's not the end of the world, nobody's dead, what are you worried about?" We're not in overdraft because I'm not. I changed some money over from another account so I'm all right. "It'll arrive. Don't worry. Give it another few days then phone them up."

Fretting over cash was one of the things he had brought with him from home. Martin's roots showed. The number of unsolicited stories he told me were fewer but the rural embellishments remained: one tutor was "a very ruthless pruner" cutting away all that was superfluous. Another seemed lax, letting him take the lead in a tutorial, but then out would come a sharp question.

A bit like an old sheep dog, sitting there by the flock and you think it's asleep.

James got me a temporary membership of Cambridge University library as a reader. I kept getting this impression that the likes of me shouldn't be there: intimidated is a bit too strong, but well I'm here now aren't I! This is it. This is academia! This is where they all come. Professor Elton's wandered round here. It brought home the fact that they're people as well.

Martin had been a farm labourer for nine years.

You spoke when you were spoken to, you had your place. You were told to do something, you would go and do it. If you worked hard you didn't get told, "Well done!" or anything.

Richard (FE tutor) mentioned this idea in 1985, going to college, "I'm sure you can get in and do a course," and I thought no I couldn't, I wouldn't be ALLOWED to do that. But what's being allowed to do with it, you're 21! Well, whether you're 21 or 43, you're still your mother's son.

If my mother was still living, my brother has often said I wouldn't be going to college now because going to college is not working.

When she died in 1987, it came home to Martin how mother was the organiser of them all with her strict code of no spongers, always paying your way, always scrupulously honest, never late. His father was 76, still working and

with a reputation for hard work and courtesy. The last time Martin went home something happened which made him feel "immensely proud".

Dad sat there with his pipe telling this historian where all these boundaries were. I thought it was great. He could remember things as clear as day, either that or he's a bloody good liar. But it made me feel that's my Dad! He was saying, "Our Martin's doing a History course, he did all about Henry VIII." It made me sort of glow with pride.

I reminded him how he had despaired of people on the farm and felt sorry for his Dad in his enclosed world.

I don't know. I've come to think he makes his own way, he's happy. His enjoyment is with doing things, possibly because he doesn't know anything else. I still think that they're locked in their own little world. Their values, while not necessarily being any worse than ours, are just a little different. The dividing lines between good and bad are, I dunno, more clear-cut. We've been doing the Victorians in History and some of the values of my father are very similar to the gospel of work according to Samuel Smiles. It's sort of like a bootstraps mentality.

What had Martin got from the course?

Another view. My mother was a very staunch Conservative, she was working class but she was Conservative, wouldn't have Labour over the doorstep. My Dad is a staunch Conservative as well. I wouldn't even have bothered to read what Labour were saying if I was at home, it would have been a Conservative vote. I voted Labour because I'd actually considered it.

You come down here. I don't know what it is about this place, maybe it's because it's close to London, but whatever it is, it makes me feel a little bit more important down here, maybe it's a bit more freedom, a bit more freedom to choose.

Martin and Sarah both got 2.2 degrees. In the Autumn I met Sarah on the way to her job with social security. Martin had no job for a year until he got one at the Benefits Office. He said the degree had helped him play the interview game, get into "teamwork speak" etc. Sarah had moved to another civil service post. They were still together. When we met, Martin gave me a poem he had written about his father, "The Man with Leather Hands".

PAM

(Mature: 14 A Level points)

I met Pam again in August 1992, when the course was over and the results out. She described her feelings at the time. I had asked her what she felt most pleased about.

Pleased about finishing it. I had a very funny experience, I suppose it's partly tension. You know, the marks were coming out and I thought is it going to be a 2.2 or a 3rd? I came in and checked the board, looked at the 2.2, which is where I expected I would be, and I thought oh good! I spoke to somebody at the side of me and thought now I can return my library ticket. I get up to the library. I felt quite overcome, faint and peculiar. By the time I got home I was really in tears. It was because you'd finished in a way. You suddenly feel like you've been sacked from work or made redundant. I went home and I thought I don't belong here any more. Now what am I going to do?

Pam was tired. Even things in depth on television or in books were too much. She just did not want to know. Did she have a sense of pride in her achievement?

I think the main feeling is, if I could do it now, **why didn't I do it years ago? Then it would have been more use to me.** That's a backward-looking view. That's non-productive isn't it?

Her tears had little to do with missing the company. Pam said **she had felt quite lonely in the third year.**

For the first two years, there's a lot of mature students and I didn't feel odd, didn't feel out of the main stream. Somehow this last year, perhaps it's just the way it happened, because in all the groups I was the oldest and there weren't many mature students, I was beginning to feel I was losing myself somewhere. I suddenly began to feel it's a different education system from what I remember. **I feel old in the system. I think it's, what am I going to do when I've finished anyway? Do I really want to bother?** I had to keep saying to myself, it's just because you're tired. I'm feeling like everybody else.

She felt she had been held back by coming to college late because the young students had a wider knowledge and had been taught ways of going about their work. But that was not the only thing.

This is all totally foreign. I've got to the third year and I'm still floundering. It's because it's moving faster is probably nearer the truth.

At one stage I have wondered whether I wanted to do the third year at all. You know, I really was flagging at the end of the second year. For me two years was actually long enough. I don't mean I expected a degree for two years' work - say you could have a diploma after two years, that would have been enough for me.

I got to the summer holidays and I thought - I think it was the special study that was bugging me actually. I made up my mind I couldn't do it.

Pam had done a village study for History and did think about pursuing the idea of the changing landscape. She went to the county archives but someone said she would be unlikely to get 5,000 words out of that. She needed nearer 10,000 words and so she settled on the Common Agricultural Policy and diversification in farming. That meant majoring in Geography.

Maybe I shouldn't have majored in it. I just didn't know what to do for my special study. Desperation I suppose.

There was so much information and things kept changing, and I couldn't get the interviews I wanted. All in all, it was a bit of a non-event I think. You know, it was par for the course, but I didn't feel very inspired by it. It had been close to the waste bin two or three times.

What was the biggest hurdle Pam had to face?

Trying to adjust from doing it to please myself to doing it within a system if you know what I mean. I was doing it to please myself, could put it down, leave it alone, not do the exam if I didn't want to do it. You know, the sort of the have to. I appreciate it had to be but I began to ask myself, was I doing it to please myself or wasn't I? This is different. This is very much more formalised. You know, you go and you get a grant and you're there for three years and you do this and you do that. I found that quite hard.

Comparison and competition cropped up again.

It really got me down in the last year. I began to feel that if anybody else said, "I'm on course for a 2.1 or a 2.2," I'd have hit them on top of the head.

It was really getting on my nerves. I got to the stage where I began to avoid certain people that just kept going on about it you know.

Everything was rushed.

When you stop and think about any individual thing, you tend to think, did I really understand that thoroughly or did I just understand it enough to carry on? They're coming at you so fast in the third year, you flounder. You get so tired, you're not really coping, doing everything so quickly. Which is why it's a degree, I don't dispute that. If they made the degree so easy you could walk through it, it wouldn't have any value. You've got the special study like a little goblin on your shoulder and you've got the pieces of work ongoing and the exam at the end. I thought do I really want all this?

I have said, in effect, was it really worth the effort? In terms of a job, yes, was it? On the other hand, you could say, it was an interesting three years, more interesting than if I'd spent three years being a secretary. The subject matter's been interesting.

I pressed her on the interesting subject matter and she referred to "patches of things", Victorian towns, for example, riots and public order, the Romanticism and Realism in the first two years.

I liked that sort of thing, going round looking at things. We went round docklands with Geography and looked at that from a more objective point of view. That's before it all went broke of course. That's the trouble isn't it? With Geography everything's changing all the time.

Pam was not clear about whether she had changed over the past three years. Her husband said she tended to be different but she could not be more specific about that. Perhaps when she was further away from it she could judge better. She did offer some thoughts.

I'm sure it will enable me to see things from different angles - pick up bits of conversation - make a reasonable statement about more things. You would expect to be able to do that I suppose.

Finding work was not urgent but Pam would be happier if she did eventually; at 45 it was important to keep moving. She had signed on at the agency.

I want a job if you understand me, but I don't want to work all day sitting at a typewriter because I decided I didn't want to do that ten years ago. I want something that's totally different, that's really worth putting myself into. There isn't much for mature students that are stuck in Bedford, but if you're doing temping and something comes up while you're on the way round -

The last time I saw Pam she was doing occasional secretarial work through the agency. She was waiting for something to "come up" but not actively looking.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DEGREES OF TRANSFORMATION

Analysis of the final interviews centred on evidence of personal changes and of what had helped to bring them about, on **transformation as an achievement or a process**. In Chapter 10 the indicators of transformation were put in terms of increased awareness, the acknowledgement of errors and acceptance of what is the case, and greater personal control or freedom. Transformation was linked to **personal exposure** and the abandonment of pretence. The point was made that neither compartmentalisation of experience, such as occurred when Gill avoided facing the implications of gender issues in her own life, nor reliance on external motivation, as with the tutorial "kick" which lifted Dan from his rut, was compatible with transformation. The process of transformation was evident in Gill's second year when her whole life was affected, her understanding was "coming from the inside" and she was no longer being "manipulated by people".

'Transformation' is not a new concept. The term finds a natural home in religion in talk of the transforming power of the Spirit, where spiritual wholeness is said to involve facing and holding together Truth in all its complexity and contradiction. (Fowler 1984, Johnson 1991) In this study no necessary religious connotation is intended but there is perhaps a 'family resemblance'. (Wittgenstein 1958) Being transformed in the way that Gill does involve seeing life as it is and remaining reasonably confident in an unpredictable world, but the similarity with the religious usage ends there.

Fletcher and Ruddock (1985) use 'transformation' in a discussion of adult education. As in this case it refers to the development of critical awareness and the changes in abilities and character that brings. They, however, write in the context of political empowerment. In a similar vein, Brookfield (1987) draws on Friere (1970) and Mezirow (1977) to make transformation an end of teaching. People are to be empowered through workshops specifically designed to challenge their expectations and assumptions.

Freedom from false assumptions and from manipulation by others are important aspects of what is understood by transformation here but here the emphasis is on the personal and the existential rather than on emancipation in the political sense.

Barnett (1990 p199) is nearer the meaning intended in this context when he links education to emancipation as self-understanding and self-empowerment, but his is a

philosophical discussion of how people ought to change. In the present study the concept of 'transformation' arose from an analysis of the experiences of a group of student informants. Although evaluative, the concept is grounded in data, embedded in description. What happened not what should happen was the starting point. Official transforming activities, formal processes of education, were not given pride of place. Attention was paid to what otherwise could have seemed peripheral: the social, the personal, the contingent and serendipitous.

'Transformation' as it is employed here has no mystical connotations, no necessary link with politics, and is not tied to any prescribed educational activities. It is a way of expressing how some individuals changed. The nearest other usage is perhaps that of Strauss (1977 Ch4), for whom it was a useful term for avoiding both the idea of a terminus and of an essence in

the open-ended, tentative, exploratory, hypothetical, problematical, devious, changeable, and only partly-unified character of human courses of action. (Strauss 1977 p91)

Of central importance are shifts in understanding.

Shifts in concept connote shifts in perceiving, remembering and valuing - in short, radical changes of action and person. (ibid p92)

To be transformed is to see differently, hence the metaphor of the lens, linked semantically with exposure. Transforming changes in how things are perceived bring shifts in understanding and a "cognitive perspective" (Peters 1966) that gives new meaning and spurs actions.

In some informants their transformation was clear as they took a more critical stance to themselves, "faced myself" as one put it, and gained a sense of self-worth. There was evidence of independent thinking, seeing the world under fresh frameworks and taking a more distanced view. Some recognised wrong turnings and good decisions, how others had led them to lapse or helped them along the way. They could see former times in a new light. One informant had hardly changed at all. Transformation varied in type and extent. What informants had faced, the tasks and hurdles that beset them, varied: social, personal, contingent and structural. Of the influences upon them, the effects of the course were perhaps the least obvious. The course set the structural hurdles, but there were also informal assessments by others and self assessment as a person. Rowntree (1977) wrote of assessment as human encounter and Strauss (1977) of the

search for identity through mirrors and masks. The data in this study bore witness to those wider insights.

In commenting on individuals I draw most heavily on the final interviews. Where reference is made to earlier data, numbers in brackets indicate the interview from which they have been taken: (1) for the first year, (2) and (3) for the second year interviews.

Pam largely avoided both the ledge and lens and her life was left much as it was. She got the 2.2 she expected and returned to agency secretarial work. What she said about her special study, what Martin correctly called "own up time", summed up her college career.

All in all, it was a bit of a non-event I think. You know, it was par for the course, but I didn't feel very inspired by it.

The special study "bugged" her. Pam had "made up her mind" she "couldn't do it". Despite having two good A Levels she predicted that she was "not going to be that good a student" (1), a self appraisal that did not waver. A two year diploma would, she said, have been enough. Exposure "within a system" of continuous assessment and public competition, where marks often dominated conversation, was hard. The discussion of grades irritated her. This was not, however, because of her intrinsic engagement with the course material: in relation to that, Pam remained passive. The course was doing her good (2) but was not part of her. There was nothing she was "really thrilled about". (3) Pam sought a security that HE cannot offer. An "ideal essay" (1), her model answer, was an illusion. "Did I really understand that thoroughly or did I just understand it enough to carry on?" The pace and uncertainty were too much. Her association of "doing everything so quickly" with degree level work carried its own message.

Her modest result Pam met with, "oh good." But then came tears and "I don't belong here any more. Now what am I going to do?" At the next big transition, disengagement can be nervous, protracted, postponing exposure to a wider world, or it can be confident and swift. For Pam it was neither. An immediate sense of loss was followed by a hesitant return to the mundane with no ambition to move on. It had been "an interesting three years" and would enable her to "pick up bits of conversation, make a reasonable statement about more things", but her view of the world had stayed the same. Pam's was a story of backing away from the ledge.

Although Dan said he was "just buying a bit of time" (3) he achieved a 2.2 degree from the basis of a poor

entry score and his ambitions had been slightly raised. When he last contacted me he talked about a teaching career. However his record was that he had wanted an office job when he left school and he found one after returning home from Bedford. It was hard for Dan to leave. For some months he stayed in town with friends. "My friends, I think that's the main part of college."

If I left college without a degree I'd obviously be pretty upset, but I wouldn't think I've wasted my time here. I'd think things have been worthwhile. I've developed as a person and I've had a good time as well.

I've definitely got more confidence in myself, not necessarily on the work side, but socialising.

Dan needed deadlines and the knowledge that assignments counted. When he lapsed into a period of almost total idleness, a tutor's intervention was needed to jolt him out of it. James Hewitt's display of anger was a turning point. Although academic work remained external to him, Dan did complete the course and begin to appreciate the need for a more organised life.

I've learnt more about how to live. You know, I never realised, just stupid little things like organising yourself to do your washing and shopping, setting time aside to do things like that. It's not all just studying and going to lectures.

I've become more my own person like, because I've left my mum and dad, I left that sort of safe unit where I didn't really have to do much, think much for myself.

This may have been put in jeopardy when Dan went back home. What were not in doubt were his increased confidence and ability to see his college career in a broader perspective.

it's run its natural course.

I know it's not real. It's not the real world.

I saw this bloke; he's left the course, he just hangs around in the bar. To me he looks really out of place and I reckon that's how I'd be. You're just trying to hang on to something aren't you?

Andrew graduated with a 2.1. He played it down, but it did counteract his school experience. Teachers advised him not to aim high. He was in fact offered a university place but lacked the confidence to take it up.

I think if I'd have left and got a job in that frame of mind, I could have been stuck. I needed to be liberated. I think that's what this place has done for me.

The liberated Andrew was slow to disengage. His ambition to be a film director had hit reality and he stayed in Bedford for a year doing his part-time job. The turning point came when he met Mandy, a BEd student who gave him direction and helped him look towards teaching to combine with his interest in media. He told me that he was most helped by students, workmates, tutors; "people that I can meet and talk to" and added, "It doesn't happen very often." Mandy gave him space.

If this person is someone you can call a friend then they probably understand that you like being on your own.

Andrew's friendships show an interesting progression.

Photo? Me and my friends.... have to be in a pub because that's where we spend so many of our waking hours. (2)

Spenser Road got to me. (3) I've got too much work, a job, and a girlfriend who suffocates me. (3) I did take a wrong turn by allowing my life to get out of control again. (3)

Looking back and seeing what I've done wrong: girlfriends, trying to get into a group I probably didn't belong in, choosing the wrong degree. I've made lot of mistakes.

The growing attribution of responsibility to himself is clear:

it's such a Mickey Mouse course. (2)

You can get by doing the minimum here and it's not good enough. You should be MADE to do more. (3)

Hoping for a helping hand is just my way of copping out. I should do something about everything that's wrong. I WISH something would happen. (3)

I was hoping for Divine intervention but it never came.

Andrew moved into Hall on his own for his final year, he ended his suffocating relationship and concentrated on his degree. I asked what he had learnt at college.

Be an individual. I haven't been able to do it and I've learnt that I should have. That's important. When I first came here I tried to conform to everybody else's pattern, that's why I started going out and getting drunk.

What I've learned here is that in the end you learn. With time you begin to see things differently.

Nicola said she had been "a bit glorious, a bit far-fetched" to apply to universities:

I'm sorry, I'm terribly thick, you can probably tell by my results. (1)

She did not achieve the 2.1 she would have liked and she missed her first choice for teacher training but she did gain a PGCE place elsewhere and the 2.2 she predicted. Nicola survived her disappointment at A Level and was no longer in her sister's shadow. The break from home had been made and she was fulfilling her ambition to teach. A "terrific worrier" (3) had become more independent and confident. In this she was greatly helped by the support and friendship she found at Caves Lane. Being placed there was a happy accident, a facilitating contingency. Her informal transition to the second year was eased when she stayed on there. It gave her security with independence from her friends who moved out into a house nearby. Her growing independence was enhanced when she spent the third year on her own in France.

The best thing about college in Nicola's view was that her mind had developed: she had "learned a lot from the literature side" and her ideas were firmer. Dogmatism, however, did not mark those ideas. It was "worrying to put things in boxes". She felt that the mature students probably got more from the course and appreciated it more than younger students did, and added;

I suppose, rather than looking at the whole life as a student, I'm just looking at the education itself.

"The whole life as a student" involved learning about oneself too. Nicola had grown in skill and confidence. Her propensity to apologise for herself had stopped and she assessed her strengths and weaknesses in a more dispassionate way. She said that her ideas were mature even though expressing them clearly was still a problem: "but I think it will come in time". The signs were that it would.

With good A Levels and a boarding school background, Emma seemed to be the sort of person to take easily to college. Predictably, she achieved a 2.1 and attributed

her success to the help and support of the tutors. Her love was Drama. She would have liked to work in theatre but good openings were rare and stage school expensive. Emma's response was sensible and practical, to get some secretarial skills and build up some funds. She seemed like "the salt of the earth" (Stanley 1989), those pupils and students who neither give nor have problems, but appearances mislead.

The work itself was not easy for her. In the second year it became "drudgery" and Emma "had to knuckle down and get things done" to "keep a hold on the course." (3) Her main battle was, however, not with academic exposure but with personal exposure. Insecurity was "the big one." It was "fight with it all the the time." She was "always a bit scared" (1) and "self-conscious." (2) Boarding school had been "a very enclosed little world". College was an enclosed world too but with "more of a choice of who you can be with" and a "bit more freedom", a freedom which tested Emma's confidence.

It's funny you know, people think you've gone away to school and you have all this confidence. You do in a way, but not necessarily you know. Sometimes people will knock it out of you. You can have it superficially you know at certain points but then really you've got to find it in yourself.

Finding confidence "in yourself" is an important part of transformation. Social exposure was a linked problem for Emma; thinking others "don't really want to be with you" and that "people will laugh". Drama was one way in which she coped: a mask and a script lessened her exposure. In France it was different, particularly after her friend Rachel had moved out of their lodgings. There was nobody to hide behind: Emma was alone on the ledge of personal exposure. It was the biggest turning point.

I had to sort of face me.

I just began to, I don't know, it probably sounds strange, but just sort of like me as a person. I had to face myself you know at points because I was on my own, and then, through that, I was around people who were caring and friendly and so, because it gave me confidence, everything just seemed to fit in with me.

Challenge and support combined in her transformation.

I learned there were good things about me as well...that I shouldn't just have a paper bag over my head.

If 'value-added' were the main performance indicator, Martin came out very well. He went from one O Level to an Honours Degree. More than that he "broke the mould" (1) and did so with as much opposition as encouragement from his family. He loved the farm and identified with it but despaired of the entrenched views of those around him. A series of contingencies brought him into higher education: going to FE college to keep someone company, having a tutor there who took a personal interest in him and then finding an HE college prepared to accept him.

I'm VERY LUCKY to be here. I know that. I'll get one shot at this. (1)

College was a "job of work" to Martin and the associates he chose to be with were "not shirkers". (3) He sought and found help from tutors, other students, and from the counsellor. His 2.2, his academic achievement, was only part of the story. He was a "very shaky type of person". (2) When Emma, Rachel and Martin presented a piece from Pinter to the group, it was "a psychological battle" (2) and, in all probability, a turning point in his college career. What Martin had to say in class did not seem to him to be worth very much. He felt outside this "college ring" (2) and its academic language. That changed as his confidence grew. From his work on Pinter he was able to contribute to a discussion in an English seminar.

I've never spoken so much for ages and I enjoyed it because I felt I put something in to the lesson.

In History he felt able to challenge the tutor when he said that the people were better off in company towns.

Yes, but wasn't it also a means of social control? And he stopped me in my tracks and said, "That's what separates the good historians from the bad historians."

Martin saw his own life in what he was studying. His parents' strict code was part of an ethic in which he shared their pride and he learned to look with greater tolerance on a world view of which he once despaired.

I still think that they're locked in their own little world. Their values, while not necessarily being any worse than ours, are just a little different. The dividing lines between good and bad are, I dunno, more clear-cut. We've been doing the Victorians in History and some of the values of my father are very similar to the gospel of work according to Samuel Smiles. It's sort of like a bootstraps mentality.

Martin gave this accurate self assessment:

I'm not an excellent student by any means, but I'm not a dope. I'll probably end up with a 2.2. I don't think that's bad.

I'm a little more confident now, not much, just enough to actually get by. I don't actually feel cleverer.

Before the final examinations this "very shaky type of person" was "the calming influence rather than the one who was rebounding off the walls". He owed this in no small part to his girlfriend, Sarah; their relationship marked a turning point for him. Martin did not think he had changed much but he felt he had something to say that was worth saying now and he had "another view" on the world.

Whatever it is, it makes me feel a little bit more important down here, maybe it's a bit more freedom, a bit more freedom to choose.

The most thorough-going transformation was in Gill. There was a change of outlook, a new independence of thought, new independence as a divorcee and a new job. Gill left school at 16 and had already tried three careers before she came to college: the police, working as an air hostess and then a dental nurse. They were worlds where the role of women was subservient, a role reinforced for Gill by what was expected of her at home. Becoming an undergraduate gave her a sense of purpose for herself and she 'took it all on board.' (1) When I asked her to tell me about a time when college really lived up to her expectations, she could not isolate one incident. She was learning all the time.

It's been brought into so many different other things in my life that people have actually noticed....my use of language...how I actually write now is very changed. The whole broadening of my horizons....Now it opens a door - that you think where does it ever end? (1)

College helped her see "lots of things in a clearer light" (1) and that was not limited to intellectual understanding. There was personal growth and taking control of her own life.

Marks do come into it, but I don't think that's at the top of the list. It's more this whole growth as a person. (2)

Achieving I think, going somewhere... It's opened lots of new doors, new avenues... how I approach life. I'm more aware of things, it's given me new insights and different ways to tackle things. (3)

You find where you want to be and the people that you want to be with. (3)

Both my husband and my family... have said how much I've changed and they don't like what they see. Actually, for the first time probably, I'm not manipulated by people. (3)

The direction Gill was going in was her own. Walking out of her marriage was a turning point, prompted by the independence of mind that college had given her and made possible by the emotional support and practical help her friends there could offer. The goal of graduation became a driving force in her life. Although the importance she attached to the means became almost destructive, she did not waver from her goal. The college ethos helped.

One of the best things is the size of the college. The lecturers are accessible to you and it makes it a friendly, personal thing. That is what I needed.

However supportive the ethos was, Gill was fortunate to have the particular people around her that she did: the counsellor, the fellow mature students who gave her the emotional and practical help to cope with her marital break-up and her academic pressures, and Linda, the tutor who went to see her at home when everything seemed insurmountable and arranged for Gill to defer her final examinations. It was another turning point.

When she came to college Gill had soon appreciated the qualitative difference in what was being asked of her. Properly conceived, higher education, as Barnett (1990) argued, should be liberal, placing the emphasis on the student as an independent and critical learner.

This is just so different. It's demanding so much more of me. That's what's probably leaving me feeling very underconfident and unsure... This critical thing, which is running through all the subjects. (1)

Coming into this environment has made me really feel quite unsure about all my other past knowledge, experience and everything. (1)

Early in her undergraduate career Gill's words captured something of the ledge of academic exposure. Atherton reflects this idea in thinking of learning as loss.

(Atherton 1995) The challenge is loss of security. Gill left the ledge to grasp that challenge.

It is developing, this critical awareness of things.... a new-found confidence...in being able to question... everything's coming together as well... it can only grow in one direction and everything just fits together. (2)

However, everything was not fitting together when she said that. She was avoiding what was most significant to her, avoiding personal exposure.

I tend to steer away from gender, feminism, that kind of thing. I'm more into theories. I just find it easier actually. (2)

The breakthrough came later in the course. Faced with choosing between Sociology and English for her major, she chose English after a particular piece of writing.

I started off high with Sociology but now I actually feel that the English is coming from the inside. It was my own feelings all coming out. (3)

Gill went to see Linda to discuss pursuing a feminist topic for the special study.

I hadn't thought of feminism and that kind of issue. In the life I'd had, it wasn't important.

Being in close proximity with the other students and learning from them, it's taught me that other people have got to let people be free...

It's expanded the way I sort of see people's space, very much so, respecting another person's space.

I've become more open-minded, more tolerant, tolerant of difference I think, of people's differences.

College gave Gill "new eyes... you can't close again." New eyes are the lens of transformation. Her experience "touched everything": what she was, what she felt and what she did.

Transformation involves emotions and attitudes: to the world, to others and to oneself. The new eyes are turned inwards as well as outwards, the eyes of an acceptance of what is and a tolerance which allows others their space. It was Ivan's tragedy that he found no space and could not cope with the tensions that beset him in Spenser Road.

Transformation is hard to measure. Table 12.1 tries to reduce complexity to a simplicity it does not possess; not out of "Physics Envy" (Ayers 1990) but for a clearer view. Three aspects of transformation are listed and points given to show degrees of change, 5 for the greatest movement.

Table 12.1 Degrees of Change

A a wider perspective on the world and one's place in it
 B self appraisal and self acceptance
 C achievement and direction
 T total 'score'

	A	B	C	T
Gill	5	4	5	14
Martin	3	4	3	10
Emma	2	4	3	9
Nicola	3	3	3	9
Andrew	2	3	3	8
Dan	2	3	1	6
Pam	1	1	1	3

Table 12.2 is a statement of value-added as shown by Entry Points and Degree Award. 'Scores' are calculated in line with the following key:

Entry Points	Degree Award	Value-Added 'Score'
0- 5	1	15
0- 5	2.1	13
0- 5	2.2	11
6-10	2.1	11
6-10	2.2	9
11-15	2.1	9
11-15	2.2	7
16-20	2.1	7
16-20	2.2	5

Table 12.2 Academic Value-Added

	Entry Points	Degree Award	Ac V.Add 'Score'
Gill	0	2.1	13
Martin	0	2.2	11
Nicola	6	2.2	9
Dan	8	2.2	9
Pam	14	2.2	7
Emma	18	2.1	7
Andrew	20	2.1	7

Table 12.3 combines Tables 12.1 and 12.2.

Table 12.3 Change, Value-Added and Totals

	Degree Award	Change 'Score'	Ac V.Add 'Score'	Total 'Score'
Gill	2.1	14	13	27
Martin	2.2	10	11	21
Nicola	2.2	9	9	18
Emma	2.1	9	7	16
Andrew	2.1	8	7	15
Dan	2.2	6	9	15
Pam	2.2	3	7	10

Accepting that the scores are subjective and imprecise, there are some patterns:

Table 12.1 shows a degree of consistency across cognitive perspective, self appraisal and acceptance, and achievement and direction, which lends support to 'transformation' as a unifying concept.

Table 12.2 shows an association between entry points and award (but that association is not sustained when seen in the light of value-added).

Table 12.3 shows a greater consistency between change scores and academic value-added than between either and the awards.

This consistency between change scores and academic value-added seems worth following up on a wider scale. It was much closer than anticipated. However that may be, the tables show how entry points and degree awards can be supplemented by more sensitive information to give a view that not only takes account of value-added but also goes beyond "the education itself" as Nicola put it.

The performance of the mature informants showed how development as people, ie change scores, was as pertinent to them as to younger students. The two most successful students, Martin and Gill, were both mature and the least qualified for entry academically. Other colleges Martin had applied to had discounted him. On the other hand, the matures in this group who had good entry points, Pam and Ivan, fared the least well; Pam is at the foot of Table 12.3 and Ivan left before the course was over. This hint of a bimodal distribution could well be tested on wider scale and an attempt made to determine some of the key factors in success. The

distinguishing features in the histories of Gill and Martin were the struggles they had to get to college, the firmness of their decisions, the intensity of their commitment and the crucial part played by contingencies: critical encounters and circumstances. In a different situation where she did not have such strong informal support Gill's single-minded determination to succeed could have had precisely the opposite effect.

Table 12.3 does not unduly flatter those with high entry points nor those who achieved "good honours". What it does show is the comparatively modest performance of the two young males, Andrew and Dan. Given that Mark, the other young male did not survive beyond the first year, there is a suggestion here that may be worth further work: that young males have particular struggles and hurdles that make their educational journeys the more hazardous. Staff talked of "street credibility" and of appearing "cool". The informants' stories from Spenser Road in particular gave ample living evidence of what this actually meant. It created tensions reported to be worse than those caused by money problems, tensions that drove Ivan out of college. They are worth a study in their own right.

In this chapter proposals about individual achievements have been made and some pointers given to possible future research. In Part Three of the thesis, the analysis of the informants' experiences will be set out more formally and compared with other theories of transformation. The extent to which the findings may be more widely applicable will be discussed and, given that this inquiry was carried out as practitioner research, there are, finally, some reflections on theory and on the implications of the findings for practice.

PART THREE

CRITIQUE AND DISCUSSION OF IMPLICATIONS

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION

In Part 2 the subjects' (informants) experiences were presented as case studies, juxtaposed at four different stages in their student careers. Each stage was followed by a commentary in which key concepts were highlighted: eg transitions; exposure to new challenges; routines; priorities; dependence and control; tensions; direction; reflection; realisations; contingencies; turning points and transformation. This chapter brings the commentaries together in an overall account to give an interpretation of these students' stories during their college years.

Thinking of transitions, routines and transformation is one way of making sense of the web of data the student subjects offered; 'web' to convey complexity and interconnectedness. Prompts were open-ended to allow the choice of what to talk about to rest with the students. The social and personal challenges they faced featured along with the demands of study and assessment. In their formal and informal lives there were transitions, times of entrance and exit and times of change that affected how they coped and what they were learning, transitions such as: becoming a student; finding new friends; formal assessments and examinations; moving out of college accommodation; maybe finding a partner; choosing a major subject; taking finals; graduation and leaving.

All the subjects had to find ways to manage often unfamiliar freedoms alongside the demands of study and they all felt insecure. Their insecurity was a striking message from the early data. In the initial exploratory interviews one of the staff had said that there had to be an anchor; a pressing need was to find the security of a new routine, any routine would do, even if it were harmful. Transitions brought changes in routine, which could be steps backwards or mark turning points towards personal transformation.

Routines emerged as a focus of particular interest in this study, but they were difficult to articulate with any precision. 'Routines' was used to describe both habits and time-tables and all reasonably consistent approaches to work, leisure and friends. In that sense routines were inclusive. They were consciously adopted, with a purpose in mind, or fallen into and apparent to the students themselves only in retrospect. They could be a retreat from new challenges or a means to overcome them in a process of transformation; the personal change that is shown in fresh insights, new vocabularies and behaviour, enlarged self-understanding, increased confidence and control.

There was much more than the course for these students to manage, more than is generally reflected in the academic literature on higher education. (eg Barnett 1992, Haselgrove 1994, Marton et al 1984, Ramsden 1992) They had to cope in different degrees with, for example: uncertainty about social and academic expectations, loss of confidence, loneliness, a new licence, balancing conflicting pressures, informal and formal judgments being made on them.

Year One was a step into the unknown, predominantly a time of transition, when common concerns were to cope with social exposure and find a place and role in a new setting, to assess the demands of study and weigh one's standing in the scale of grades, to set priorities and find a manageable routine. Grades were not carried forward from the first year but the year's work had to be passed for entry into Part Two, the second and final years. The end of Part One was a formal transition point. For many students there was moving out of college and finding accommodation. For some of the subjects that was a significant informal transition.

Year Two should have been a settled time, a year of routine, when sustaining a satisfactory workload and keeping up spirits and interest were the main tasks. However, the routines, the approaches to work, leisure and friends, which the subjects adopted, often lacked balance and brought them neither personal satisfaction nor the means to cope with those tasks. 'Workload' was a deceptive concept. What was required was externally set but personally interpreted. These students put different demands upon themselves. They found it hard to get the balance right and were seldom at peace with the course, with others or with themselves. The second year was marked by the tensions of academic exposure as their different struggles became most clear; for example, fulfilling academic demands while appearing cool about the course and loyal to an informal group, the priority pressure, or, conversely, becoming overwhelmed by the workload and swept into ways of working they knew to be unhelpful, a form of almost frantic busy-ness. Anxiety and guilt seemed inevitable. The second year was not the "comparatively easy time" the course leader had said it was, not even in purely academic terms.

The Final Year had the structural hurdle of finals and then disengagement, the next major transition. It was a time for the individual, for independence in learning, the enjoyment of solitude in working on the special study. In Martin's words, it was "own up time". "Own up time" suggests bringing the lens into focus upon yourself. The year was associated in particular with personal exposure and reflection: with seeing reality,

recognising mistakes and turning points, accepting responsibility and taking control; with indicators of growth, with transformation.

Exposure emerged as a pivotal concept and responses to exposure, how it was faced and managed, were central in the process of transformation, in personal change that affected understanding, emotion and will. The ledge and the lens were suggested as metaphors for the subjects being on the edge of experiences: the ledge to signify facing new challenges and the lens to symbolise looking again at the world and, most importantly, at themselves. The anguish of existentialism (a fear of independence) and the challenge of constructivism (to make sense of the world and one's place in it) went together. Not hiding from reality and from oneself was a major achievement. Data illustrated a process of growth through exposure.

These students' experiences were interpreted in terms of three phases of exposure: social, academic and personal. The tidiness which 'phases' suggests may be misleading, but a progression was discernible, a development that reflected Maslow's (1955) hierarchy of needs. Being accepted and finding a group or person to relate to was the main early concern. For most subjects the demands of the course, having to fulfil its requirements, face formal judgments on their ability and be tested against others, came second in time and priority. Transformation occurred only with personal exposure, a 'final' phase when subjects faced themselves and their frames of reference. If not in tidy temporal terms, that was a kind of culmination, a major time for learning.

In the first phase the main challenge facing subjects was to find their feet and be accepted. The focus was initially on fellow students, who could help or hinder progress, be diversionary or supportive. Responses to social exposure influenced priorities since associates were a very important factor in routines.

In the phase of academic exposure the task was study and the main focus was assessment. Finding the will to work and a productive routine were not straightforward. As well as having to find a comfortable balance in what they did, resisting excess in work or in leisure and rest, the undergraduates had to accept that a personal input, a certain independence, was required in learning. Seeing knowledge as provisional, neither set in stone nor a matter of personal opinion; accepting tutors as advisers and critics; seeing assignments as more than hoops to be gone through and grades and comments as feedback on the work and not simply as personal ratings; these were all achievements.

In the 'final' phase of personal exposure the task was self-appraisal and acceptance, with successes and failures properly attributed, realistically assessed, and the world understood from a wider perspective. Being transformed is an end as well as a process, a state of being and understanding; transformation is an intrinsic end of education. Seen in that light, 'final' has more than a temporal connotation.

The phases were broadly successive but could not be neatly identified with years of the course for all the subjects. For example, in her first year, what made Gill feel unsure was not the social situation so much as what she could see were new knowledge demands; the need to interpret, be critical and not accept at face value. Her epistemology was challenged in a form of academic exposure early on. Gill's experience of varied careers had helped her feel at ease in a range of situations and, although she felt disadvantaged in the company of students with A Levels, the general social ambience at college, far from being a threat, she saw as supportive. Similarly, her personal exposure was not confined to the final year but became most obvious in the second year when her English was "coming from the inside" and she was beginning to take more control in her own life.

Transformation was an organic process and the phases of exposure were interrelated. The chart shortly to be presented as Table 13.1 does not show the path that was taken by every subject in an inevitable sequence of development. It portrays a progression that was clear in the stories of their experiences that the subjects collectively gave. In its concept of transformation, the progression inevitably reflects the researcher's values, but it is a concept which arose from an analysis of the reported experiences of students and was not imposed upon them. It will be recognizable to tutors and educationalists and may gain some consent among them. What the table adds is an enhanced awareness and understanding of the process by including the social and the personal as well as the academic and being rooted in everyday concerns. The "academic" has been accorded most space in the Table but that is in terms of detail not importance. The "academic" defines higher education but it also limits the way in which higher education is understood.

Table 13.1 sets out, in three phases, the challenges that were faced and the changes in perspective that were discernible in the subjects' accounts. The headings - NEEDS AND TASKS, FOCUS and PERCEPTIONS - are relatively straightforward. Perceptions were of special importance since how subjects saw things held out the possibility of change. The perception columns show a form of growth

in personal adjustment: for example, associates could be worn like trophies, seen as rivals, used as therapists, or they could be friends. Andrew distinguished between mates and friends in our first conversation, friends being people he could talk to. By the final interview his view of friendship had been refined; friends would respect his individuality and allow him space - not a feature of life among his 'friends' at Spenser Road. Gill, commenting on what had taught her the most at college, talked of the bond she enjoyed with fellow students, of the need for respect, and of her growing tolerance. It was all right to be an individual among friends. Friendship is an achievement and is listed last. Similar forms of progression can be traced in the other perceptions columns, like the ways in which the course, assignments, grades, tutors, books and knowledge were viewed and came to be viewed in the second phase of academic exposure.

Table 13.1 Transformation

PHASE ONE: SOCIAL EXPOSURE

NEEDS AND TASKS	FOCUS	PERCEPTIONS
Security	Finding feet	Self & Others
Affiliation	Being accepted and supported	Peers seen as accessories - mates - competition - therapists - helpers - friends
Routine	Managing Time	Leisure - all important Work - all important Work/Leisure - in balance
Solitude	Managing Oneself	Being alone - threatening - welcome

Table 13.1 Transformation

PHASE TWO: ACADEMIC EXPOSURE

NEEDS AND TASKS	FOCUS	PERCEPTIONS
Survival	Course	- buying time - holding on - getting through
Studying		- learning - critical awareness
Self -realisation		- whole growth as a person
Finding time	Assignments	- impositions - tests
Sustaining interest		- challenges - aids to learning
Self -esteem	Grades Comments	- personal opinion - personal attack - contest with peers - useful feedback
	Tutors	- infallible - prejudiced - advisers
Being Critical & Selective	Books theories	- infallible - nonsense - sources
	knowledge	- the truth - provisional

PHASE THREE: PERSONAL EXPOSURE

NEEDS AND TASKS	FOCUS	PERCEPTIONS
Self Appraisal	Self World	- Lack/Cognitive Perspective
Self Acceptance	Failures Successes	- un/fairly - attributed
Letting go of college	Aspirations Confidence	- un/realistic - un/justified

'Cognitive perspective' means seeing experiences under a different aspect, less particular and direct. Sometimes a subject's growing insight could be linked to the course, often it could not. Gill, seeing herself as subject to manipulation, showed her study of feminism to be influential. Martin became more tolerant of his parents' values when he saw their Victorian "bootstraps mentality" and the absolutist morality in his studies. However, Dan's recognition of the college as a "safe" but "unreal" world could not be linked directly to the course. Neither could Emma's realisation that she should stop "having a paper bag over her head", and Andrew's seeing his mistakes as a failure to be an individual. These insights were also part of wider perspectives and indicators of transformation. It would be a mistake to restrict undergraduates' growth in understanding to the application of academic concepts to experience.

In charting the challenges the subjects faced and the changes in how they saw themselves and the world, this study has shown how what emerged as an abstract ideal related to everyday experiences. Seen as exemplifying transitions and routines, as examples of their facing social, academic and personal exposure and changing their perceptions and behaviour, their experiences have been interpreted as part of a process of transformation, and that concept has been grounded in their lives. They faced differing challenges in varying degrees: lack of confidence; loneliness and being different; appearing cool: weakness of will; making time to work; using that time efficiently; academic language; critical awareness; being judged and compared; fear of independence, control and responsibility.

Formal and informal transitions, such as becoming a student, finding new friends, intermediate assessment points, changing accommodation, going abroad, choosing a major and finding a partner, became turning points only when they involved having to adjust and change routines. Feelings about others in relation to themselves and vice versa, how they interpreted the course demands and rated their ability to cope, their fears, their priorities and epistemologies were reflected in their routines.

Routines gave a kind of security, but it could be a false security as routines became counterproductive. This is shown in the table on the following page where each numbered condition can be traced through to its partner response and consequence. (see Strauss and Corbin 1990 on axial coding)

Table 13.2 Routines and their Consequences

----- CONDITIONS (Exposure)	1 Feeling socially isolated or threatened 2 Pressure to conform to others' norms 3 Feeling inadequate in knowledge or skill 4 Pressure from assignments/ exams -----
NEGATIVE RESPONSES (Routines)	1 Retreat into hiding or pretence 2 Immersion into the social round or into obsession with marks 3 Posing, feigning unconcern or projecting faults on to the course and tutors 4 Excessive and dependent "busy work" -----
CONSEQUENCES of negative responses	1 Isolation and denial of self-worth 2 The routine becomes rootless and possibly routeless 3 Continuing inadequacy with a chip on the shoulder 4 Panic, exhaustion, illness -----
POSITIVE RESPONSES (Routines)	1 Seeking support and/or counselling 2 Being with a positive reference group 3 Seeking tutorial help 4 Setting focused and attainable targets -----
CONSEQUENCE of positive strategies	Greater possibility of successful resolution of tensions -----

Thinking about exposure and routine as having dimensions of intensity and duration (Strauss and Corbin 1990) gave me an insight into the seriousness of the problems some of these students faced. The social exposure Andrew felt on arrival was intense. Even though he wanted to join in, he hid in his room for the first two days. This extreme initial response was short-lived. Cajoled by a group who became, in his eyes, first "mates" and then "friends", he immersed himself in their parties as his avowed priority, but he remained sufficiently detached to keep his hold on the course and come to appreciate that they were a group he did not belong in. Ivan, too, felt tense. Unlike Andrew, he wanted to be left alone, but he needed acceptance; in his context, that meant street credibility with a group of younger males. Ivan appeared to them to "come out of his shell" and "enjoy himself" in their social round of student licence, but, swept along by a group he could not enter and on whom he depended for a false security, his routine brought him a state of inner conflict. He felt outside the group but could not detach himself. The tensions of social and academic exposure that he felt were so intense and long-lived that he left. Whether that was inevitable is an open question. Other subjects' experiences suggest it was not and that a heightened awareness of his problems by his tutors and associates could have helped. Dan's "dolite" rut and Gill's frantic work routine were both strong in intensity and duration and they could well have left as Ivan did. What made the difference were, in Gill's case, supportive friends, and, for Dan and Gill, timely interventions by tutors, which they described as turning points. Ivan enjoyed neither the support of friends nor the intervention of tutors. He left shortly after his guitar and bicycle were stolen.

How individual subjects coped was not simply in their own hands, their stories showed how contingent events and encounters could be critical. The ways in which they responded to challenges and whether they developed as people was affected by facilitators and their obverse: Gill having friends who could sympathise and help and a tutor prepared to go the extra mile; Nicola being placed in Caves Lane; Ivan having a room in Polhill and then sharing Spenser Road; Emma finding herself on her own with a supportive French family, and so on. Such events and circumstances could appear unremarkable, minor, but their effects were not. Sometimes they were associated with the official world of college but often they were not: sometimes they were consciously sought, often they were not. Serendipitous, they could be the crucial conditions for turning points and for subjects' being able to find new meaning in life, in both senses of that word.

Strauss (1977) saw critical incidents as turning points in personal careers, times which forced people to see themselves in a new light. 'Turning points' can perhaps give a misleading view of how the dawning of new insight and/or a change of direction can occur. For one Road to Damascus experience like Emma having to face herself in France, there were many smaller unheralded changes which were the result of more mundane exposure and tension. Finding new competence, confidence and meaning was not always associated with a particular time or place or incident. Nicola saying, "It just came", and Andrew commenting, "in the end, you learn. With time you begin to see things differently" reflected what is common human experience. Realisations were not always forced. Sometimes they came as experience was reflected on and learning was recognised in retrospect. This study took a less dramatic view of critical incidents than is usual; to include everyday exposures and challenges, routines and facilitating conditions, as well as trigger events and larger crises. It could be argued that the inclusion of the ordinary in the account given of transformation increases the account's relevance.

A literature search carried out in December 1996 showed 'transformation' being used most often in studying institutional management. In educational theory, Mezirow's work in adult education was the most evident. His seminal paper, 'Perspective Transformation', linked depth of learning to situations when "life becomes untenable", to having to resolve "certain dilemmas of everyday life", what are referred to as 'life crises': loss, change of residence, "betrayal or rejection, and scores of less significant interpersonal encounters". (Mezirow 1977 p154) There is enough in common between his ideas and the interpretation put upon data in this inquiry to warrant further exposition and discussion.

Mezirow's concept of adult education derives from his theory of adult development, which gives primacy to a form of learning in which adults become critically aware of the psychological and cultural assumptions and myths behind how they regard themselves and their relationships.

By doing so, we move from an uncritical organic relationship with society to a self-consciously contractual relationship. This is a crucial development task of maturity. (Mezirow 1977 p163)

He refers to this as 'perspective-transformation'. It resembles 'cognitive perspective' and the growth in personal control and responsibility used as indicators of transformation in this chapter, although the mention of society gives a different emphasis. Arguing that we

should look to Philosophy and Sociology for an awareness of the questions undergraduates need to ask, Barnett makes a related point, but from inside the traditions of the disciplines. (Barnett 1990 p198) Higher education that is worthy of the name, is, in his view, linked with self-understanding and empowerment. It is both liberal and radical. Mezirow was inspired by the consciousness-raising typified by the women's movement, civil rights, and the writings of Freire, and is recognisably more radical. It is interesting that he comes from adult education, which is arguably less restrictive. Trezise (1993) contrasts its creativity with the more rigid, institutionalised traditions of HE.

Mezirow's epistemology is not based on detached logical analysis like that proposed by Hirst (1974), with forms of knowledge resting on distinctive concepts and tests for truth, but draws on Habermas's (1971) proposition that knowledge grows from three areas of human interest: a technical interest in controlling the environment; a practical interest in understanding human interaction and culture; and an emancipatory interest in liberation from dogmatic dependence. Emancipatory action is what Mezirow means by perspective-transformation, which he claims to be a form of learning that is probably least familiar to educators. In early formulations of his theory he linked it specifically to social roles.

This is the learning process by which adults recognize their culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for them and take action to overcome them. (Mezirow 1981 p6)

Taking action to overcome dependency is central to his ideas. Mezirow's theory was backed by the experiences of women in the USA on re-entry programmes to college or work, designed to encourage seeing one's role in society in new ways, embracing new options, and growing in self-confidence. Classes emphasised sharing experiences and mutual exploration of new directions.

Ekpenyong (1990) argues that Mezirow narrows down the applicability of 'perspective transformation' by suggesting that only learning which is based on socio-psychological events can bring self-awareness. Mezirow (1991) refutes this as confused. The confusion seems partly to stem from Ekpenyong assuming that Mezirow's view was based on three domains of knowledge: empirical-analytic sciences to do with proof and falsification; descriptive social sciences to do with interpretation and explanation; and critically oriented science, to do with the self-reflection associated with perspective-transformation. He asserts that Mezirow holds that the first two domains cannot help growth in critical self-

awareness because they "depend on traditional methods of education" (p164), and that learning through social interaction or dialogue within an "existing meaning scheme" (p168) is not effective as a means of bringing about perspective transformation. Mezirow clarified his account as follows:

As I have attempted to formulate a transformation theory of adult learning, it has seemed useful to differentiate two domains of intentional adult learning: instrumental learning (learning to control and manipulate the the environment or other people) and communicative learning. Communicative learning involves understanding what someone means and involves values, moral decisions, ideals, normative concepts and feelings. Emancipatory action is to be understood as a transformative process which occurs in both domains.

A transformation in perspective can result when one becomes aware of how such perceptual and conceptual filters as social norms, cultural codes, cognitive or learning styles, scope of awareness, neurotic inhibitions or defence mechanisms have distorted the way we think and feel about our experience.

What I have said and continue to believe is that learning through social interaction and dialogue is the only way perspective transformation is ever effected. When we reflect on the premises of our problem and come to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions involving the kind of perceptual and conceptual filters suggested above, we can only do this through social interaction, by coming to see alternative ways of seeing through the perspectives of others. (Mezirow 1991 pp159/60)

Mezirow's main messages are about the mode and manner of learning. To be emancipatory or transformative, learning must be experiential and self-exploratory, challenging accepted assumptions. In the terms used in this study, it must be existential and constructive of new meaning and it must involve personal exposure and adjustment. In the case studies of undergraduates, managing social and academic exposure was only part of the learning process. Without personal exposure there was no transformation. According to Mezirow, for this depth of learning to take place there must be social interaction and dialogue. Students need to take the perspective of others more aware of the psychocultural assumptions that shape their experience who can give them the support to sustain new directions. In practical terms that means special programmes and classes for groups with particular needs.

Of the subjects, Gill provided the clearest example of 'perspective transformation' and 'emancipatory action'. With no A Levels, she could have been on a re-entry programme; as it was, her transition to degree studies was eased by counselling. Gill was transformed through feminism. She said she had not thought of that issue in her former life, "whereas through this you start to think about it". A particular tutor, aware of the assumptions behind the roles of women in society, enabled her to take another perspective and helped her to self-reflection and exploration. This was not, however, in a class set up for the purpose, but in the ordinary curriculum. Gill's epistemology was, in fact, challenged from the first year by what she called "This critical thing, which is running through all the subjects". Those who helped her sustain a change of direction were not a special group either, but friends she met over coffee. Gill's college career showed how in a jigsaw of experiences, circumstances and encounters could fall into place. Mezirow's ideas and prescriptions applied only in part.

With other subjects, the compatibilities with Mezirow are again strained. Emma, for example, found herself alone in France and it was being alone that brought personal exposure and transformation. There was no group and no taking the perspective of someone more critically aware of psychocultural assumptions. Emma did, however, enjoy the friendship and support of the French family she was living with. Support was a common thread in the stories of transformation. Andrew was sustained by the friends he found working part-time in a canteen. He began to see things differently "with time" but, again, not through social interaction so much as solitary reflection.

Emma, Andrew and the other subjects, with the possible exception of Pam, changed during their college careers. As their case histories and commentaries showed, they were transformed to some degree, if not as obviously as Gill. Transformation is not all-or-nothing.

Ekpenyong (1990) suggests 'paradigm-transition' as a more inclusive alternative to Mezirow's 'perspective transformation'. Its basis is Kuhn's (1970) theory of scientific revolutions. A 'paradigm' is a "state of reality", "a state of being". Any researcher or inventor whose work causes a paradigm shift is described as a "maker of reality", but so are a teacher who initiates children into number symbols, an adult educator raising the consciousness of peasants, a consultant improving an organization's interpersonal relationships. (Ekpenyong 1990 pp174/175)

Inventors, researchers, consultants and teachers change realities, but others are clearly not seen as essential by Ekpenyong, even for very large shifts in perception:

... when an adult learner, either through a process of self-reflection, experimentation or circumstance, stumbles on ideas or events that come to give new meaning or explanation to established ideas or assumptions and equally accepts to hold on to or operate within this new state of understanding, he has experienced a paradigm-transition.

(Ekpenyong 1990 p165)

"Established ideas" means the "accepted norms of a given society" here.

Ekpenyong extends paradigms or states of reality to personally established ways of understanding as well, like those of a prenumerate child and those of employers and their employees whose interpersonal relationships are poor. Emma's new view of herself and Andrew seeing his past in a new light both involved paradigm-transitions in this extended sense.

The actual words are not important. The common concept behind 'transformation', 'perspective transformation', and 'paradigm-transition' is what matters: a change in outlook that affects action, emotion and will. It comes about in different ways. Neither Emma nor Andrew changed as a result of intentional learning or someone else's teaching. Ekpenyong refers above to circumstance and to stumbling on ideas or events that give new meaning. It is unfortunate that he does so almost in passing and a potentially fecund point is not elaborated. Mezirow focused on intentional learning, on challenging taken-for-granted assumptions. (Mezirow 1991) His main concern is critical reflection in special classes. This study, by contrast, includes unintentional as well as intentional learning in its subjects' ordinary lives, both in college and outside.

Nelson (1994) questions whether critical reflection is as central to transformation as Mezirow appears to think and suggests that receptivity, recognition, the emotions and the imagination are more important. What he calls "autobiographical learning" can occur while people are "engaged in the everyday construction of their lives". Hardly aware of it, they are the authors of their own narratives. Nelson's idea of "adult transformation as autobiography" is a metaphor although, he adds, learning is helped by story-telling in the presence of a critical friend. Within stories are the 'stepping stones' which promote continuity, the 'turning points', and the times of 'stuckness'. Autobiographical stories, as well as

being vehicles for learning, are proposed as a promising source for research into adult learning. Conversation is the effective method for getting followable accounts; quality "narratives of both 'stuckness' and change" in which the authenticity and coherence on which validity depends are not in doubt. Although this present study has concentrated on a group of undergraduates for a fixed number of years, and not the life histories of adults, the affinity with Nelson's ideas is clear.

A literature search found that 'transformation' was used in adult education and of adult learning in general but not in higher education and of undergraduate learning. Its use in this study was unusual. The term emerged during data collection as an appropriate interpretation of the data. In the manner of grounded theory, looking up the work of others on 'transformation' came later.

That 'transformation' is associated more with adult than higher education has the advantage of bringing a fresh perspective, adult education enjoys more freedom from established academic and vocational ways of thinking, ie in terms of disciplines, mental powers and competences; and of initiation rather than transformation. As Mezirow noted, it is a concept that has been largely neglected by educators.

Part of the distinctiveness of the present study is in giving a progressive and inclusive portrayal of the lives of a group of undergraduates. Part lies in its exploitation and development of the critical incident technique. Those were stated as purposes at the outset. Looking retrospectively, a contribution has also been made to transformation theory, particularly in relation to informal and unintentional learning. The critical incident technique prompted stories that showed the importance of the ordinary: everyday challenges as well as larger crises. Through the frameworks of responses to successive phases of exposure, formal and informal transitions, routines, turning points and facilitating contingencies, a multi-faceted interpretation of what is involved in transformative experience is offered. The case studies and the summary given in the first part of this chapter of the undergraduate subjects' college transformation through social, academic and personal exposure has set out their tensions, their routines, how they changed and what helped or hindered them in a way that is catholic in what it embraces but particular in its detail.

The similarities and differences among this account of transformation and those offered by the transformation theorists that have been discussed in this chapter are shown in summary form in Table 13.3.

Table 13.3 Contexts of Transformation

Mezirow	Ekpenyong	Nelson	French
Adult Education and Empowerment	Adult Education and Empowerment	Researching Adult Learning	Portraying Undergraduates' Experiences
Intentional Learning	Intentional Learning	Unintentional & Intentional Learning	Unintentional & Intentional Learning
Special Classes	Special Classes	Learning in life	Ordinary classes & outside lives
Learning Through Interaction and Dialogue	Learning Through Interaction and Dialogue	Learning in Imaginative Construction of Personal Lives or Narratives	Learning in Coping with Social Academic and Personal Exposure
Challenging Established Assumptions	Creative Redefinitions of Reality	Responses to Circumstances "Stuckness" and Change	Positive Routines (Table 13.2) & Supporting Contingencies
Perspective Transformation	Paradigm Transition	Auto-biographical Learning	Transformation (Table 13.1)

This study has:

shown the potential of the critical incident technique to gather thick data at a personal and emotional level;

narrated the stories of a small number of undergraduates at one college of higher education, setting their experiences of the course and their learning in the context of their wider lives;

described how the student subjects changed during their undergraduate years;

charted the challenges they faced, shown how they responded and the consequences of what they did;

described the contingencies that helped and hindered their progress;

illustrated the interdependence of the students' informal and formal worlds;

located subjects' experiences in a process of transformation based on frameworks linked to phases of exposure, routines, facilitating conditions and events, and so proposed an analytically grounded way of thinking about undergraduate careers that widens the concept of higher education and increases our knowledge of the factors which make for success and failure.

Students' routines offer a fecund area for future work, in particular, perhaps, the routines of different sub-groups. There was evidence in this group's reported experiences that mature females faced the greatest pressures in terms of attitudes to grades and that young men could have the most severe problems in reconciling work and social pressures. This coincided with staff comments and my own experience of students. There was a temptation to pursue it in mid-study, by concentrating attention on a greater number of female matures and young men and adjusting the data collection technique to cope with more people, through group interviews and observations in places like the coffee shop and bar. Following the primary purpose of the inquiry, however, that possibility was rejected in favour of continuing the individual interviews with the same small group over time to get as authentic a portrayal of their experiences as possible.

The authenticity and validity of the portrayal will be discussed in the next chapter and, in order to address to some degree the question of generalisability from a small study, a comparison will be made with a funded survey. The comparison will comment on the strengths and weaknesses of both.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE EVIDENCE AND THE METHOD

Introduction

The main purposes of this inquiry were to explore the experiences of a group of students throughout their time as undergraduates and to develop a progressive style of qualitative research based on the critical incident technique. This chapter addresses two main questions: is the portrayal of the subjects' experiences accurate? and; are there grounds to think that it could be representative of the experiences of higher education students? The issues are about reliability, validity and generalisability.

A perspective on reliability and validity in this style of research was given in Chapters 2 and 3 in discussing the method and process. Generalisability is in one way less contentious. Its meaning is clear in this context. However, applying insights grounded in a small-scale qualitative study to a wider population is problematic and has to be tentative. The issue is addressed in this chapter through a comparison of this inquiry with one undertaken on a much larger scale. This also presents an opportunity to review the strengths and weaknesses of the critical incident technique as it has been used and developed in this study.

It was argued that, for a qualitative inquiry to be reliable, the route taken by the researcher should be easy to follow. A trail should be left, showing how data were gathered and giving the evidence to justify claims that the analytical concepts deployed were appropriate and were applied consistently. Erikson (1965) used the phrase "conceptual itinerary" for his work. It is apt in relation to this study where the conceptual itinerary had to be transparent for the account to be reliable. That was the reason for the detailed case histories and commentaries in Part 2. They were not an appendix, but central to building up a case.

Conceptual itineraries are subjective. Their validity depends on their coherence and adequacy, on how well they portray the data, including, of course, their fit with the facts. In this study, the facts were what the subjects reported. Whether they were telling the truth was an important question. In logic, a valid argument need not be true. In research, a valid interpretation has to rest on the truth, on reality. The critical incident technique was used to obtain data that were true to experience, high in reality, but 'reality', as

previous discussion made clear, is not a straightforward concept. What is a realistic portrayal?

Questions of Reliability

Distinctions can be made at three levels. Of what might be called the "raw facts" of events and encounters, it can be asked whether data told us what actually occurred and who was there. Did they rest on the truth in that sense? Of the meaning that the subjects placed on events and encounters, it can be asked whether what they said was authentic. Were the subjects telling the truth? Of the researcher's portrayal of the subjects' experiences, it can be asked whether the analytical concepts used gave an account that was true to life. Would it, for example, be recognised by those involved and by others who have had similar experiences?

Clandinin and Connelly (1990) argue that judging whether or not the truth is being told in narrative inquiry depends on criteria like adequacy, possibility and sense of integrity. Following what has been said, this is not disputed, but, without correspondence to "raw facts" and the authenticity of subjects' reports, the story could be fiction rather than research. In this study, backing for the facts, for the authenticity of reports, and for the verisimilitude of the grounded theory arose in several ways.

Checking facts at different times with the same subjects was made possible by having successive interviews. The most obvious way in which facts were corroborated by others was when different subjects reported the same events, for example: the parties around the blocks in the first year, which Ivan, Andrew and Dan all told me about; the photoplay assignment, which Emma and Nicola were both faced with doing; the Pinter extract, which Martin and Emma worked on together; and the accounts by Pam, Martin and others of how some mature females would talk incessantly about grades over coffee, something I had often seen and heard myself.

Knowledge of the setting and being part of it was an additional source of verification. The town, the college and the staff were very familiar. Chance meetings with subjects, passing conversations with them and their friends, with their tutors and the counsellor, although not recorded, fed into the process. As was argued in Part 1, a triangulation of method was implicit in the role of insider-researcher.

Reports of the same occurrences by different people and by the same people at different times endorsed the "raw facts" of events and encounters. Opinions and feelings,

being essentially private phenomena, were different. Correspondence with external facts was not possible. The honesty and the authenticity of subjects and what they said was the issue. Getting to know subjects over three or four years and enjoying a relationship conducive to mutual disclosure and trust was the best guarantee of that. The critical incident technique as it was used in this study was a personal way of data gathering. Empathy and the enjoyment of people and their stories were essential to its success.

I can't relate very well to people, but I still like people. It's when I meet people that I like, I mean you as well, include yourself, people that I can meet and talk to. It doesn't happen very often.
(Andrew March 1992)

I don't mind it here, because I trust you and stuff like that ... It's all right. I don't know you very well, but it's nice to meet somebody ... you tell me as much about yourself as I tell you about me you know. It's identification and empathising with one another.
(Martin May 1990)

Self disclosure mattered. A rural childhood and time spent as a gardener at a 'big house' helped me identify with Martin. Time in London working as a tax officer gave a point of contact with Ivan. Years in teaching helped me relate to Nicola. From training college I had been on placement in France, which helped conversations with Nicola and Emma. A former BCHE colleague had taught Emma at school and another tutor had come from Martin's FE college and knew his lecturer friend. It all helped.

Adult education values participants as subjects, works for their empowerment, and cherishes their companionship. Some kinds of research barely begin to practise adult education; others are more advanced.
(Fletcher 1993 p47)

Critical incident, when it engages with subjects and goes beyond listing and tallying events, Fletcher counts as a good example of a "more advanced" kind of research. The view he gives of adult education is idealistic, but "valuing participants as subjects" and "cherishing their companionship" would not be inaccurate when applied to how interviews were conducted in this study,

From a more detached standpoint, the consistency in the individual stories over successive interviews increased their credibility. Inauthentic material would be seen to be out of place: if, for example, Gill had fallen into a rut of lethargy, Dan had been driven to desperation by over-zealousness, Martin had lost touch with his roots,

or Pam had eagerly grasped the challenge of the special study. Although subjects changed, the continuity and coherence in their stories warranted confidence in their honesty and authenticity.

In using the critical incident technique, there can be built-in checks which happen by chance. (French 1988, 1992) It was noted above in relation to "raw facts", but it also applied to opinions and feelings; for example, Martin's unsolicited opinion of Emma as shy and Andrew's description of Dan at his most idle coincided with what Emma and Dan said about themselves. The most striking chance triangulation of perspective on the same events and characters came in the accounts of life in Spenser Road given by Andrew, Dan and Ivan. Data independently offered were close in detail and comment and provided strong corroboration.

In a more direct approach, Emma was asked whether she remembered Ivan.

Oh that was sad. He left quite early on didn't he? I didn't know him very well because he wasn't in my classes but I knew of him. You could see him trying to be this sort of person that really he wasn't.

Checking with subjects was part of the process. It took an overt form in the final year when they were asked to look back over their undergraduate careers. Because of the time they spent in France, the last two interviewees were Emma and Nicola. They returned for a fourth year after the others had graduated and agreed to comment on the emerging interpretation of the data. After their final interviews, they individually read and discussed some of my analytical notes, including a draft of what has been presented as Table 13.1: Transformation.

Assent was indicated most obviously by nods and direct expressions of agreement.

It seems to fit in with what you've got there, yes.
(Emma)

You can see that happening all the time actually.
(Emma)

Yes, that's fair enough. It seems to ring true.
(Emma)

I can understand all of those. (Nicola)

I can imagine that happening. (Nicola)

That's a good summary, that really sums it up completely. I think that's right, yeah. (Nicola)

Another way agreement was signalled was less direct. Emma covered some points with other phrases, sometimes better ways of putting what I had in mind, by friends as 'accessories' for example.

Some students almost collect friends. There were those that did surround themselves with lots of people and that was status really. (Emma)

They wouldn't be long term friends but they would just fit in because everybody wants to fit in. You can choose; either you go with the flow or go your own way..... these supposed friends, they weren't friends at all. It's just survival. (Emma)

Neither Emma nor Nicola had thought about young males being more at risk than young females. Nicola offered:

Really? I suppose in a way this is quite a sports college and so, if you're not sports orientated, you can feel out of things. I think there's probably more problems with the lads because you have rugby teams and football teams that really do stick together. It's strange; you would think the girls would be more like this, but the blokes are quite clingy. It's funny, when it comes to men, you've got to be sort of quite popular. There is quite a strain on the males to be popular. It is strange in that way. (Nicola)

Emma gave another perspective and a striking example.

Well, they always say that girls are supposed to be more mature. In a way we've got more personal safety worries, that sort of thing, but for a man perhaps they've got to fit in with a certain image. It's true though! (in response to my raised eyebrows) I've noticed at college. I did see in the first year, I don't know if I said: it was his eighteenth birthday I think and he's a small bloke, not very butch, macho or whatever. Actually he ended up going to hospital because all his supposed friends were, "Oh Come on. It's your birthday!" and made him drink this pint of mixed spirits. He basically did it, I remember saying at the time, because he was trying to be one of the lads. He wasn't like that, but he really wanted to fit in, and, as I say, he ended up in hospital. (Emma)

She added two more examples to prove her point. On the idea of there being a divide between young students and

matures and the obsession female matures in particular seemed to have over grades, Nicola gave a reminder that matters were not that clear-cut.

You have some that say, "I'm going to get a first," from the beginning. They're just completely out to get a good grade, but you do have matures that are very sympathetic, who do in fact help the younger students. (Nicola)

As she had said in her final interview, Nicola found it "worrying to put things in boxes".

Both Emma and Nicola applied the analytical concepts to their own experience. Most of Nicola's talk was about her real friends and the task of disengagement. Emma, not surprisingly, talked about exposure. She dissented from "the ledge" as an apt metaphor for the personal exposure she experienced when she was left on her own with the French family.

Personal exposure? Ledge? I wouldn't say you faced it in that sense. I think it's an ongoing thing. (Emma)

As has been argued throughout, although it was a 'final' phase, personal exposure was always present in the process of transformation. Emma's dissent was in part confirmatory. Like Nicola's reluctance to put things in boxes, it also increased confidence that these two 'good' students were thinking about the ideas and concepts put before them, not simply agreeing with a member of staff.

Additional confirmation of the reality of the portrayal was that points which staff had raised in the initial interviews occurred and recurred during the fieldwork and analysis. Informal conversations with a range of other people during this time also lifted confidence, as when friends spontaneously applied the analytical concepts to their family and friends who were students. There was a coming together of emotional, intellectual and practical concerns as parents, relatives, friends and teachers. The reality of the account was many-layered, which also had an appeal.

Questions of Generalisability

Transformation through 'phases' of exposure gave a grounded theory of the experiences of a few students in one college. Its relevance to them and to that college might not be in doubt, but how true a portrayal was it of student experiences in general? Was there any basis for generalising. Did it have any wider relevance?

Interviews began in 1990 with students who had started their degrees in 1989. Coincidentally a funded project was researching that year's higher education intake on a much larger scale (Roberts and Higgins 1992). BCHE was not involved, but points of common interest in the population and findings gave grounds for thinking that the subjects in the small-scale study were not distinctively atypical. The title, 'Higher Education: The Student Experience', bore a close affinity to the title of this thesis. The sub-title, 'The findings of a research programme into student decision-making and consumer satisfaction', looked less compatible.

From October to December 1990, over 5,650 second year students in over 100 institutions took part in the research programme. Its aims were to assist applicants and advisers; to help those responsible for recruitment and public relations "understand better the needs of students"; to identify good practice in customer-care; to look at differences between students and "the nature of the student experience within each sector" (ie universities, polytechnics and colleges); to provide some national benchmark results and "to let students have their say." (Roberts and Higgins 1992 p3) Points of particular interest to this inquiry are in quotation marks above. Given the concern with student opinion, the authors commented that "it would have been unwise to have relied solely on the results of a postal questionnaire" (ibid p5/6) and so structured group interviews (6-8 students) were held in 29 institutions. There were "coffee bar discussions" in most of the others. These "chats" were not a formal part of the research, but data were used "to validate the comments of the focus groups and the quantitative data obtained through the questionnaires." (ibid p7)

BCHE shared the features of colleges in the survey, a bias to teacher training, more female than male students and a good number of local matures. Colleges tended to be in a rural or small town setting. Schools were much less likely to direct pupils towards colleges than to polytechnics and universities. Colleges had more late entrants and it was considered likely that more of their students were not at their preferred institution. The comparative A level points were not given but it was clear that colleges were not of high status. A related point was that marginally more college students had term-time jobs than polytechnic students and many more than university students. The college and polytechnic students tended to come from poorer backgrounds.

Students were loyal to their institutions in all three sectors, a loyalty which was attributed to lack of comparative experience. Reflecting views expressed by

BCHE subjects, "good atmosphere" was rated particularly highly by the college students, whose institutions were smaller and more intimate.

The universities scored well for resources and for organisation, whilst the colleges gained the best results for personal support and for communication between staff and students. (ibid p74)

Colleges, often in the country and small towns, tended to attract students from similar areas. Neither Emma nor Andrew relished the thought of being in a large city. Proximity to home also influenced choice, as it did for Gill and Pam.

As well as by sector, the survey compared students by gender and age, mature students with those aged 20 and under. The focus was intended to be on traditional entrants, but poor management information and random selection drew completed questionnaires from several hundred matures. Not surprisingly, mature students were attracted to local institutions. An institution's status, judged by entry grades, was not important to them. In any case, the mature students did not have to rely on A levels to the same extent as the younger entrants. In judging their institutions, mature students emphasised the quality of staff and staff-student relations more than younger students did. They were more likely to find the workload greater than they had anticipated. Younger, traditional, students were more concerned with their social life. In all these respects the group at BCHE were not unusual. Again, as with the BCHE subjects, females were more likely than males to be positive about the course and were less critical and more supportive of their institutions. They were more anxious about examinations than males, who appeared "to be more confident and more concerned with academic values". (ibid p107) That, however, meant that males rated status more highly than females did when they short-listed institutions. Their greater confidence was shown in being more positive in predicting their results and prospects for work.

Overall these results support the view that male students are more confident (or wish to appear more confident) than their female colleagues. (ibid p112)

The idea that males might wish to appear more confident than they were found support in the data from BCHE. Jason's extravert confidence concealed a fear of "the one to one thing". Andrew, Dan and Ivan were part of a set who outwardly enjoyed themselves at parties around the blocks, covering the insecurities and tensions that emerged when they moved into Spenser Road. In the first

term of their second year they would readily have ticked a list to say that making friends was easy. Later they were more circumspect.

The survey questionnaire indicated that students found making friends no more difficult than they expected. Pertinent to BCHE was:

College students were the least likely to find making friends more difficult than anticipated, thereby supporting the "small and friendly" description often used by such institutions in their promotional materials. (ibid p94)

This contrasts with the social unsureness that applied particularly to males in the BCHE study. Their stories and their reflections on them showed a level of anxiety about social exposure to peers that came as a surprise, even though, at the outset of the inquiry, a colleague had specifically mentioned "street credibility" and the need to appear cool. Perhaps students in the survey were like Andrew, Dan and Ivan in the first term of their second year or perhaps they played their social problems down.

That some problems might best be approached indirectly was, in part, recognised in the survey.

The final question in our survey examined what were loosely termed student problems. The questionnaire included the list of problems ... students were asked to tick the three which they believed were most often encountered by fellow students. We did not ask the blunt question "which of these problems have you suffered from?" because we felt that a question phrased in the third person would be more likely to generate valid results. The list of conditions was based on a survey which identified the most common issues that student counsellors were confronted with over a one-year period. (ibid p95)

It was interesting that student problems were based on issues counsellors had been confronted with and showed a belief in a continuity between the difficulties of those needing counselling and problems facing the general population of students. The questionnaire ticks, in descending order of frequency, showed student problems to be: finance, examination anxiety, lack of confidence, depressed, relationships, career/course indecision, anxiety, homesickness, housing, loneliness, alcohol, parents, sex and drugs. Common ground with the BCHE study was clear: academic pressures, lack of confidence, relationships, indecision, anxiety, loneliness, alcohol. The big difference was finance

which did not feature as prominently in the BCHE case histories as it did in the survey.

Top of the list came finances with 71%. This is much higher than the 52% who are in the red. However, we should not equate financial problems with being overdrawn. The problem may be that students would "like more money" rather than the fact that they have none at all. (ibid p95)

Even though there was a lack of clarity as to what financial problems amounted to, it was a big disparity. There were good reasons for it however, reasons to do with meaning in a wider sense, which a frequency count could not cover. In her final interview Emma had been asked what the worst thing was about being a student:

I suppose I could say the money side, but I wouldn't say that's been the worst ... insecurity, that's the big one. It's sort of fight with it all the time.

A similar point was made when Dan was asked about his overdraft, again in his final year:

Not massive, but it might be after the Easter holiday. You can cope with that. It's easier than coping with the tension that actually drove Ivan out in a way.

What the ticks missed, and may have crucially missed, was the meaning of the problems to the subjects: the tensions between social and academic exposure and what they meant to Ivan, and, at a different level, the potential for transformation in personal exposure that Emma was backing away from.

As well as through the questionnaire, participants in the large-scale study were asked about problems in group interviews. There were questions on: the problems first-year students encountered; their own experiences of any personal or study problems; whether it was easy to make friends; and whether there were people to listen when students had problems. Quotations were made but how they were chosen and how they related to quantitative data was not given. It was interesting that in the quotations from the students, finances were the least mentioned problem. (ibid p97/99) The following selection is in proportion to the sort of things mentioned:

If anyone in hall has a problem I think there is a camaraderie and you can't help noticing if someone is down. Friends tend to help out. (Poly)

My personal adviser wasn't interested at all. (Uni)

I had been with the same friends from the age of five. I had forgotten how to make new friends.
(Poly)

The social life is centred around drinking. If you don't drink, making friends can be more difficult.
(Poly)

I was homesick. I wouldn't want to go through being a fresher again. (Coll)

Handling banks and insurance companies. They sort themselves out in the end! (Poly)

My grant cheque came really late - it was a crisis!
(Uni)

I could not get motivated until the work deadlines had actually gone. Lecturers are far too ready to give extensions for work. (Uni)

Too many people worry about the work instead of actually doing any. (Uni)

The work came all at once - not spread out or managed. (Coll)

I shared a room with a girl. We hated each other totally. (Uni)

Lots of people in the house got into stupid little arguments - it got to horrific levels. (Coll)

Clear parallels could be seen between the above comments from students in all three sectors and what was said by the BCHE subjects (with the possible exception of the lack of interest shown by a personal adviser).

Further evidence of the similarity between the BCHE group and HE students in general came in comments made by the report's authors on students' responses to a question about preparedness for higher education.

Many found note-taking very difficult in the first year.

School life was seen as very organised with a very full timetable. Higher education has very little time-tabled work. Many students found this difficult to handle as they had developed few time-management skills. (ibid p59)

The group at BCHE was small, but data like the above gave reasonable grounds for thinking that their problems

were similar to those of higher education students in general and that the portrayal of their experiences and their transformation could have relevance beyond BCHE.

Questions of Validity

What the BCHE inquiry lost in scale, it gained in validity. The larger study claimed to be "rooted in personal experience" (ibid 119) but the personal was largely avoided. The main instrument was a postal questionnaire and the authors' response to openness in the group interviews gave a mixed message.

The presence of a tape recorder did not appear to inhibit the participants in the focus groups. The students were very frank and "natural" even to the point of disclosing information of a very personal nature. (ibid p8)

"Even to the point of" signalled a view that information of a very personal nature was best kept private and had no place in educational research. On the other hand, candid responses were seen as an achievement.

It is unlikely that interviews carried out by staff from the institutions concerned would have generated such a candid set of responses. (ibid 8)

That was not what I had found. Nor was it consistent with the informal strengths of colleges. Andrew saying that BACS was a "Mickey Mouse course" was candid enough. The critical incident technique and successive one to one interviews encouraged the subjects to talk in a personal way and, through their stories, to be frank about their experiences. A direct question is unlikely to have captured what it meant to Nicola when she collected her results from school. Would Ivan's story of trying to enter the tone and code of Spenser Road banter have been told in a structured group interview? Would Emma have had the opportunity to tell of the paper bag covering her head?

In the large-scale study there was negligible space for the students' own agendas and for accounts of exposure and transformation. In the BCHE study, by contrast, there was a richness in the subjects' disclosures, in the meaning they placed on their experiences, and in the extent of their personal realisations. What might be seen as weaknesses attendant upon such a personal style of researching must, of course, be acknowledged. It is acknowledged that others may have collected different data and portrayed them differently. For example, the interviews with males lasted longer than those with females. A woman would probably not have elicited the

same stories. The portrayal of the subjects' experiences was a personal one and could not have been otherwise.

A Review of the Claims

Gathering personal stories cannot be researcher-proofed, but the reliability and the validity of the data and of the interpretation placed upon them have been shown in several ways; most importantly by the clarity with which the research process was described and the detail of the trail of evidence, by the consistency and coherence seen in and across subjects' stories, and by the comparison with other related work.

When an authentic account of subjects' experiences is the aim, involving them and valuing their companionship are intrinsically important. What was a personal process of data-gathering and analysis was helped by variations in the use of the critical incident technique, which moved it a long way from reporting and listing isolated events; variations such as successive interviews shaped by ongoing analysis and progressive focusing, more varied prompts to include encounters and reactions to others, invitations to reflect on experiences told in previous sessions, and inviting subjects' comments on the analysis. Such extended uses of the technique increased opportunities for friendship and trust, for collaboration and authenticity.

The validity of the data and of the emerging portrayal was also implicit in the fecundity of the critical incident interview schedules. The items were formulated by the researcher in everyday language after analysing previous interviews. That items "rang bells" with the subjects suggested that their undergraduate experiences were being treated with understanding and empathy. The everyday wording of prompts brought rich replies.

Items from the second interview in year two are repeated as Table 14.1 on the following page to recall the style. It was an ongoing inquiry. Learning what to ask and how to ask it was both part of the process and an important part of the outcome. It could be argued that items on the interview schedules were, in an iterative sense, self-validating.

Table 14.1 Self-validating Interview Prompts

Now, please try to recall times when:

- 1 you felt very much on you own
- 2 you felt you were in good company
- 3 you felt a strong sense of direction
- 4 you felt you had left the main path
- 5 you felt you were making good progress
- 6 you felt you were going nowhere
- 7 you felt in need of a helping hand
- 8 you felt especially well supported
- 9 you felt you had taken a wrong turn
- 10 you felt pleased to be shown another way
- 11 you felt you'd earned a good rest
- 12 you felt like going back to where you came from
- 13 you felt the going was too tough to bear
- 14 you felt you'd helped someone along the way
- 15 you felt you were just being swept along

The third purpose of the inquiry initially was to explore the potential of students' stories for course evaluation. In time that focus faded. Had it remained a primary aim, it might have been justifiable to limit the topics to the course and to discourage the disclosure of information of a personal nature, but so much would then have been lost in the process: emerging from a "paper bag", finding a partner, getting divorced, seeing drunken games for what they were, appreciating what was once an object of despair. In subjects' undergraduate careers such experiences were significant and they were transformative. None were directly course-related and they would not have appeared in course evaluations.

In the eighties and early nineties it was an article of faith in HE that "the student voice" should be heard and "the student experience" understood. A major project on evaluation used case studies of students' experiences of learning and teaching to show "the range of issues and situations where an input from the student perspective can be useful in developing and improving courses." (McDowell 1991 p15) With the expected list - assessment, workload, teaching and learning methods - was the self-image of some students as mirrored in the perceived status of their courses. (ibid pp14/15) Self-image was an unusual extension in evaluations, but it was firmly tied to the course. There was no place for experiences like those listed in the previous paragraph. How could knowing about them improve courses?

The BCHE study, looking for an authentic portrayal of experiences, extended across its subjects' formal and informal activities to include their private and social lives as well as their experiences of the course. It did so simply because it was those which most concerned them and those which showed up in the stories they told. Data for course evaluation miss contingencies and turning points, miss social and personal exposure, and are not concerned with transformation. Putting the course at the centre of this study would have been tidier and much easier and would have had a more immediately relevant appearance. In focusing on subjects as individuals this study looked beyond the immediacies of course and lecture room. In the final chapter, I shall argue that it nonetheless remained an exercise in practitioner research and that its messages are pertinent to practice.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Introduction

This chapter opens with some remarks about theory in education. There is then a contrast made between practitioner research and action research which has relevance for the discussion of educational theory. Following this, transformation theory is claimed to have relevance to both understanding the experiences of undergraduates and to incorporating values. Examples of values are given as they arose in experience.

Transformation had degrees of kinds of exposure which related to these students' whole experiences, including the contingent and the unintentional. Contemporary literature on HE student experience is, in comparison, said to be "top-down", however well intended, and thus affects tutors' and students' perceptions. A case is made for knowing the contexts of individuals and for an extended view of the role of tutor.

The chapter concludes with the main messages of this study. It is suggested that the style of questioning developed in the study could make a contribution to how tutors carry out their work.

Educational Theory and Practitioner Research

The place of theory in education is a matter of dispute and can arouse strong feelings. Claims that it enlarges understanding and that practice would be impoverished without it are countered by the view that what are seen as the mystifications of educationalists do more harm than good. That professional qualifications in education are not required of teachers in private schools or of FE and HE lecturers reflects the confusion.

The problem is not only that education is subject to political controversy. There are problems in the concept of educational theory itself, what it comprises and how it relates to practice. During my professional life it has been subject to more scrutiny and change than would be expected as a result of advancing knowledge. That is because of uncertainties about its nature. Educational theory has to be concerned with values as well as facts and it is expected to guide policy and practice.

With calls for more academic rigour in the Colleges of Education where students were prepared for the teaching profession, the practical studies of the aptly called former Training Colleges gave way to educational theory

studied through its "foundation" disciplines of History, Psychology, Philosophy and Sociology. (Hirst 1983) This brought a form of rigour but, with it, worries about relevance and application so that, in time, the emphasis returned to practice, albeit in a more sophisticated form, and to the teachers, in whom an increasing responsibility for on-site professional preparation was placed. From the "prescriptive" theories of History and Philosophy, concerned with what ought to be done in the name of education, and the "descriptive" theories of Psychology and Sociology with their accounts of human development and learning (Moore 1982), the focus shifted to theories in practice (Hirst 1983), and to the "living educational theories" of practitioners. (Whitehead 1994) Such was the context of this study. I began it "as a teacher trainer with a sceptical stance towards theory in relation to practice" (p13), describing the inquiry as "practitioner research."

Not unlike educational theory, practitioner research can take many different forms. (Broad and Fletcher 1993) In educational circles it has been predominantly identified with only one of those forms, ie action research, in line with the shift in emphasis outlined in the previous paragraph. Action research has a direct relationship with practice. It arises from it and feeds back into it. Changes in practice are brought about through a cyclical process of problem-identification, planned intervention, monitoring and evaluation, the formulation of modified action plans and so on. (Elliott 1990) It can be argued however, that the basic characteristic of practitioner research lies elsewhere than in problem-solving in practice: ie in its respect for the tacit professional knowledge of practitioners, who use it in carrying out their own inquiries whatever form they take. (French 1994) The main feature of practitioner research is that practitioners are the researchers. The emphasis is not directly on practice, but on practitioners and their understanding, including their awareness of gaps in their understanding. This thesis arose from my being aware of a need to know more about the experiences of undergraduates as they gave meaning to them. There was no specific problem in practice to be addressed. What emerged was a portrayal of the subjects' experiences with implications for how students' careers are viewed.

In discussing educational theory, Dearden (1984) made a distinction that is pertinent here. He distinguished between "pragmatic relevance", which has an immediate bearing on practice, as with the outcomes of action research, and "thematic relevance", where the impact comes in how situations and events are given meaning. Dearden argued that it would be "very unwise" for the direction of theorising in education to be determined by

the criterion of pragmatic relevance (Dearden 1984 p10), not least because problems in practice arise in situations that can be seen in different ways. Relating the distinction to this study, the argument is that the portrayal of the subjects' experiences as phases of transformation has thematic relevance for practice. How well tutors understand the experiences of students informs how they see their role and what they do.

The theory of transformation is a catholic perspective on learning which is particular and concrete in its examples and illustrations. It is grounded in students' experiences and not in preconceptions about courses and learning. Prescriptions for practice that may be derived from it are general and require particular translation. The relationship between how a situation is seen and what is done is complex. Tutors work in circumstances affected by many contingencies. Their actions and reactions involve beliefs and feelings, their values and attitudes to knowledge and people. It is never only a question of technical know-how.

Transformation Theory and Values

Socrates's paradox, "To know the good is to pursue it", asserted the interplay of knowledge, feeling and values, and of means and ends. It is a merit of transformation theory as it emerged in this study that it showed how undergraduate activities and experiences can incorporate values. The movement to a mass system of HE amid demands for efficiency and value have increased the temptation to ignore that. In the first chapter of this thesis it was noted that 'quality' in HE is a "slippery word", difficult to translate into policy and practice. Ball preferred "fitness for purpose". (Ball and Egginis 1989) However, purposes in HE in the 1990s are themselves instrumental: skills, competences, employability, the economy and the working world. It would be naive to deny their importance, but the quality of life that they make possible is left open and the regress of instrumentality is infinite.

Talk of "fitness for purpose" lends itself to thinking of ends apart from means, of purposes and then the best ways to attain them. Such thinking is not new. In the 1990s the impetus is economic. In early debates about educational theory it was analytic positivism. O'Connor (1957) argued that all questions in education could be reduced to two: what are valuable as ends and what are the means to reach those ends? The second question was for the sciences, the home of real theory. 'Educational theory' was at best a courtesy title for O'Connor.

In this more technical age O'Connor's tidy perspective on education is enjoying a resurgence that should not go unchallenged. As Hogan (1990) has argued, the "ascendant technological rationality" in current educational discourse, the notion of "practice-as-an-instrument", reflects a mistaken emphasis on what Aristotle called *techne* and a neglect of his idea of *praxis*, *praktikos*, which involves a way of life devoted to the right way to live, to values in living.

An instrumental perspective dividing means from ends is neat and can charm but it is flawed. It underestimates the extent to which conscious actions and contingent processes encapsulate ends in education. When tutors take an interest in individual students and listen to their concerns, including their private concerns, it is not only a means of lubricating their academic learning; it exemplifies a respect for persons that is part of what being educated means. Friends are not only a means of helpful support; a growing appreciation of friendship and a capacity for it are part of being transformed - as White (1990) has argued, friendship is a neglected aim of education. Tutorial openness is not simply a ploy to encourage students to think for themselves; it engages them in the provisionality of knowledge, in what Gill called "this critical thing". Coming to accept self and take responsibility is not a lesson in morality; it is constitutive of it. The democratic and moral values shown in how other people, knowledge and self were regarded by the subjects were part of the process of their transformation and of what it meant for them to be transformed. In Table 13.1, Transformation, the place of values was made clear as they emerged in the phases of social, academic and personal exposure.

Transformation: A Student-Centred Theory

The portrayal given of these undergraduates' experiences incorporates values. It also shows how much that was transformative arose unintentionally and in areas of their lives largely untouched by the course, untouched by practice in that sense. A concentration on *techne* overlooks the moral and democratic values of *praxis*. A concentration on practice fails to pay due regard to the other areas of life where transformation is hindered or helped and can restrict the professional understanding it is intended to develop.

The theory of transformation did not arise from studying professional intentions and practices. It was grounded in the experiences of undergraduates as they chose to report them for their meaning to them. The tensions their exposure gave rise to, the routines they adopted, and the consequences of their routines were shown as

Table 13.2. The context, the experiences of a group of students in higher education, made this study and theory of transformation distinctive (Table 13.3). It would have been a distortion to use institution-centred or course-centred concepts.

Possibly because of external pressures on institutions and courses, contemporary literature in HE tends to be written from top-down viewpoints. Barnett, for example, divides a collection of articles into the institutional perspective, the course perspective, and the national perspective. (Barnett 1992) Haselgrove's collection on "The Student Experience" is sectioned into getting in, being there, and moving on, but the contents show a more formal approach: eg application procedures, franchising and FE/HE partnership, financial support, accommodation, enterprise skills in the workplace. (Haselgrove 1994) The title, "The Student Experience", betrays a certain tidiness of outlook. Haselgrove herself points out that in the UK, educational researchers and institutions of HE have taken little interest in 'other' segments of students' experience. The 1995 summer conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education had two main themes: how "student experience" was changing and how it should change. The topics again had an official ring: modularisation, breaking boundaries between part-time and full-time education, student finance, increased group sizes, the nature and purpose of HE, the shift to customer-orientated services, student-centred learning, student empowerment and the new technologies. Haselgrove expressed the hope the volume she edited would stimulate the thought and debate "needed to explore the realities of student experience in all their roles in a higher education context." Such thought and debate however, cannot substitute for students' reported experiences such as those which comprise this study.

What is missing in the research literature is the **experience** of crisis, the insider's view: What does the world look like to Carl? How does he describe his overall situation and his larger goals? In what ways does he create meaning and purpose? And, of particular importance, where does school fit in the general pattern of his life? How many youngsters would echo the response of a child who, when I asked him what he thought of school, said: "I don't think nothing about school. I got too much on my mind."
(Ayers 1990 p271)

Ayers was working with children at risk, but the same questions informed the present study. Where did the course fit into the undergraduates' lives? What was on their minds? Is it assumed that because undergraduates have 'made it' and are successful by definition that

there is nothing to learn? Substitute college for school, Dan for Carl and student for child, and the parallels become less strained.

It is a neglected area in regard to undergraduates, but the significance of other segments of experience has been clearly seen elsewhere in educational research. (Goodson and Walker 1991) For example, that researching people in circumscribed roles and situations limits understanding has been recognised to be as true for teachers as it has been for children. (Butt et al 1990) What is true of teachers is true of students. They have their private as well as their "professional" lives in college. Rather than having a larger number of subjects, it could be argued that the group in this inquiry should have been smaller to allow a yet closer consideration of individual participants.

Structurally, much has been done over the past decade to recognise individual differences. This can be seen in access, entry qualifications interpreted as ability to profit from the course, in students being more free to construct their own programmes, and in the spread of student-centred learning. The impact of the changes can, however, still be limited. 'Student-centred' learning can be far more directive than the name implies. Farrington (1991) has argued that what the practitioners of student-centred learning conceive it to be may be the most important question. This echoes Dearden's argument on the importance of thematic relevance to practice. A relevant message from this study was how the subjects' experiences interrelated and how their circumstances and relationships affected what they were learning.

Perspectives on Learning and the Role of Tutor

'Full-time' students are not just students. They are friends, daughters, sons, wives, husbands and partners, parents, people with hobbies; increasingly they are part-time workers. Their contexts of meaning intermesh in how they see the world and in what they are learning. The same setting contains many contexts. Not knowing their contexts, we can bestow on their experiences meanings different from those the students give them.

Some notion of standards of attainment must be in place for public accountability. In that context, outcome measures have moved towards "value-added". Different backgrounds on entry and different degrees of progress made during a course make value-added appealing, but it is still problematic, especially so if learning is taken to mean more than academic grades. This study made a small contribution to that debate in Chapter 12 (Tables 12.1, 12.2 and 12.3 pp193/194).

It has been known for a long time that learning in HE can be superficial, that assessment procedures are partly to blame, (Becker et al 1968, Marton et al 1984) and that 'reproducing orientations to study' are linked to heavy workloads and lack of choice, and so on. Some of these problems could be seen in the case histories: in frantic note-taking, in attitudes to assignments and to knowledge, and in some of the tensions of academic exposure; some because tensions and conflicts arose from other contexts too. Concentration on the course misses the conflicts with social exposure. It also misses the point of transformation through personal exposure. A thorough grasp of an academic subject is no guarantee that a process of learning has not been superficial when seen in terms of transformation.

Ideas for tutors to improve their effectiveness can be found in Ramsden (1992) and Rowland (1993). Ramsden draws heavily on research into learning in disciplines and departments. That is not the main concern of this study. More pertinent here are comments such as: "the emotional aspect of the teacher-student relationship is much more important than traditional advice on methods and techniques of lecturing would suggest," (Ramsden 1992 p75) and, "No one can ever be certain that teaching will cause students to learn." (ibid p80) The case histories have shown something of why this is so.

Rowland works with teachers. His emphasis is on ongoing interpretive inquiry, which acknowledges feelings and the existential. HE tutors of non-professional courses can learn from the processes of reflection he describes. Rowland is his own subject and his purpose is to reveal and reflect upon his own practice. (Rowland 1993 p11) That, as with action research, is a limitation. In this study the subjects were a group of undergraduates and the focus was on their whole experiences. Their case histories showed that what went on in seminar and lecture rooms was a small part of the story. How they related to the course involved the other contexts in which they were living and what they were learning was not confined to it. The process of transformation extended beyond course and the college.

Morgan writes from the perspective of distance learning and his appreciation of interrelatedness is clear.

If we look at the learning process in a broader context, we see a complex pattern of the interactions of studying with people's lives. These interactions can have a major impact for adult learners, particularly part-time students, where learning can contribute to major adult change and development. (Morgan 1993 p126)

What is all too easily overlooked is that other contexts can be as important in the careers of full-time students as they are to part-time students. For example, what Morgan calls "education without consent", ie facing hostility to study at home, applied to Martin and Gill in different forms, and would certainly be an apt phrase to apply to Spenser Road. It is not confined to distance learning. What can also be too easily overlooked is how undergraduates' other contexts can themselves contribute to the transformation process and that there is more to learning than, to use Nicola's words, "the education itself". As Haselgrove's (1994) comments on HE research and HE institutions implied, an appreciation of the significance of full-time undergraduates' lives beyond the course is lacking. Although students' whole lives cannot be compartmentalised, it seems that they are of official interest only in terms of problems and then it is a job for the support services.

Clearly, human problems do not lend themselves to neat classification and anyone who sets out to help and support other people in coping with their problems is likely to be drawn into dealing with the whole person and their situation seen as a whole.

(Earwaker 1992 p6)

Earwaker is a member of an HE support service as well as a lecturer and bases his arguments on his experience and on interviews with tutors. He believes that support should be seen as an integral part of the educational process. Data in this study lend some weight to that.

Transformation takes place in individual contexts of meaning. There is nowhere else. From his experience of teaching both adult education and undergraduate classes, Tresize (1993) argues for an approach in HE that is more tailored to individuals, an approach which combines the flexibility and creativity "encouraged by being outside the walls of institutional thinking" with the rigour and sustained study of degree work. In HE, course proposals are presented formally for validation, but plans must be accepted for what they are, routes to realisations. One difference for my own practice that this study made was to include as much tutorial contact with individuals as possible by cutting down on lectures and seminars. For a part-time tutor it was the only way to make time to get to know individual students. The loss of coverage was justified in that I was better able to relate the course material to them and to appreciate their wider concerns.

The effects of packed syllabi and assessment schedules, held up as the safeguards of standards, are well known in the literature, but they are still clear in overload,

stress and superficial learning. This is because, as Ramsden puts it:

much of what is now being done in the name of maintaining academic standards is based on naive theories of learning. (Ramsden 1992 p11)

Ramsden concentrates on the educational milieu, on courses, institutions and departments. This study showed how performance on the course and, more important for their transformation, what subjects were learning and the depth of their learning involved other environments and contingencies.

Earwaker (1992) argues for a fresh look at the tutorial role all lecturers undertake. In the everyday work of HE neither the moral authority of pastoral care nor the therapy of counselling are appropriate. Counselling is different from tutoring in being associated more with the id than the ego. Teaching sets tasks and tries to enhance understanding whereas counselling tries to help people through traumas and to correct deficiencies. In any case, although more may be expected of lecturers than lecturing, they have neither the time nor the training to be counsellors. Earwaker argues that they should nonetheless explore with students anything that is affecting their work and their college careers and they should know when to seek extra help for them.

Good tutoring can however do more than exploration and referral. It was evident when David jolted Dan out of his rut and when Linda went to Gill's home to help sort out her anxieties. These were cases of tutor awareness and tutor concern which also exemplified human values in their preparedness to go the extra mile. Nicholas's conversations with Andrew and the FE college lecturer Richard's interest in Martin were examples of good tutoring that went further than helping them to cope better with college.

Earwaker's argument for tutorial responsibility is sound but only as far as it goes. Its focus is on problems not on possibilities and it looks to restoration in course and college terms rather than to transformation.

Whereas Chapter 1 described a time of upheaval, this study has shown the significance of ordinary everyday experiences. Earwaker writes that a "common shared experience" based on "tradition and settled commitment" has been affected by changes in the composition of the student body, in the size and character of institutions, in their staffing, changed purposes and, "above all, a changed context." (Earwaker 1992 p41) He goes on to say that HE students now have very different experiences

from those they had in the past. This inquiry has put a question mark over that. It asks whether changes in students' everyday experiences are as great as they are said to be. Some upheavals have had a direct impact - the demise of the all residential college, the greater responsibility students now have for housing and feeding themselves, their diminishing personal finances and greater need for part-time work - but the case histories showed a continuity in the human dilemmas and struggles the subjects faced. A heightened appreciation of their stories; of their transitions and exposures, their routines, the traps and turning points, and of the indicators of transformation could be very helpful both to lecturers in their tutorial role and to students.

Questions of Relevance

The messages from the thesis have been general and the relevance thematic: filling an acknowledged gap in HE research with a portrayal of the experiences of a group of undergraduates; developing a theory of transformation in HE; showing how praxis involves more than techne; adding to the debate about value-added; arguing for an enlarged conception of learning and the tutorial role and for a increased appreciation of the significance of the everyday. In connection with that appreciation a more direct contribution to practice has been made in the use of the critical incident technique. Developing that style of questioning has pragmatic relevance.

The research process has demonstrated the kinds of questions and style of asking them that can explore what students are feeling and the sense they are making of their experiences. Finding everyday ways in which to phrase items was an essential part of this process. If an ordinary lay phrase could not be found, an item was dropped. (French 1989, 1992) Questioning needed to be both searching and supportive to enable the researcher to listen to how the subjects saw their experiences and themselves. It could do the same for lecturers in an extended tutorial role, sharpening their understanding of students as well as the students' understanding of themselves. Critical incident, lightly used, proved to be an effective vehicle for showing the undergraduate subjects' engagement in taking and making their own roles, in finding social space and social significance, and for helping them in the process of transformation.

Questioning is used by tutors to test knowledge, sound out understanding and provoke engagement with ideas, but it can do much more. It can tell them about the issues of studentship and facilitate student transformation. The right questions show human concern, help integrate experiences and prompt reflection on personal identity

and direction. The educative importance of sensitive questioning is probably more far-reaching than has been realised in HE. Research into the kinds of questions personal tutors and tutors in general ask, questions that go beyond the curriculum, would be a next step.

The subjects' worries and what they faced were familiar; learning to be with others, finding friendship with space, support and direction, accepting uncertainty and responsibility, seeing the world and themselves clearly without loss of heart. The argument of this thesis is that the human and familiar should be kept in the forefront of HE thinking and practice at a time when its mass nature could extend alienation. The human and familiar can themselves be transformative.

REFERENCES

- Argyris C and Schon D A (1974) Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness San Francisco: Jossey Bass
- Ashkam J (1982) 'Telling Stories' Sociological Review Vol 30 No 4 pp555-573
- Atherton J (1995) 'Learning as Loss' Unpublished paper presented to a De Montfort University Bedford Education Research and Development Unit seminar
- Ayers W (1990) 'Small Heroes: in and out of school with 10-year-old city kids' Cambridge Journal of Education Vol 20 No 3 pp269-276
- Ball Sir C and Eggins H (eds) (1989) Higher Education into the 1990s: new dimensions Milton Keynes: SRHE/Open University Press
- Barnett R (1990) The Idea of Higher Education Milton Keynes: SRHE and Open University Press
- Barnett R (ed) (1992) Learning to Effect Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press
- Becker H S (1981) Exploring Society Photographically North Western University
- Becker H, Geer B & Hughes E C (1968) Making the Grade-the Academic Side of College Life New York: Wiley
- Bougon (1983) 'Uncovering Cognitive maps. The Self-Q Technique' in Morgan G (ed) Beyond Method: Strategies for Social Research Beverly Hills: Sage Publications
- Broad B and Fletcher C (eds) (1993) Practitioner Social Work Research in Action London: Whiting and Birch
- Brookfield S D (1987) Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting Milton Keynes: Open University Press
- Burgess R G (1984) In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research London: Routledge
- Butt R, Townsend D & Raymond D (1990) 'Bringing Reform to Life: teachers' stories and professional development' Cambridge Journal of Education Vol 20 No 3 pp255-268

Caple T & Deighan T (1986) Managing Customer Relations: Taking a Snapshot Industrial Training Research Unit for NWThames Regional Health Authority

Cave M, Hanney S, Kogan M & Trevett G (1988) The Use of Performance Indicators in Higher Education London: Jessica Kingsley

Clandinin D J and Connelly F M (1990) 'Narrative, Experience and the Study of Curriculum' Cambridge Journal of Education Vol 20 No 3 pp241-254

CNAA (1992) Evaluating the quality of the student experience: Proceedings of a conference held on 4 April 1991 London: CNAA

The Council for Industry and Higher Education (1990) Towards a Partnership: The Humanities for the Working World London: CIHE

Crolley T (1982) 'The Identification of Training Needs for Probation Officers' Unpublished MSc thesis, Department of Social Policy, Cranfield Institute of Technology.

Dearden R F (1984) Theory and practice in education London: RKP

DfE (1992) Student numbers in higher education - Great Britain 1980-1990 Statistical Bulletin 8/92 June 1992 Darlington

Ekpenyong L E (1990) 'Studying adult learning through the history of knowledge' International Journal of Lifelong Education Vol 9 No 3 pp161-177

Earwaker J (1992) Helping and Supporting Students Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press

Elliott J (1990) Action research for educational change Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Erikson E H (1965 edn) Childhood and Society Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd

Farrington I (1991) 'Student-Centred Learning: Rhetoric and Reality?' Journal of Further and Higher Education Vol 15 No 3 pp16-21

Flanagan J C (1950) 'The Critical Requirements Approach to Educational Objectives' School and Society Vol 71 No 1849 pp321-324

Flanagan J C (1954) 'The Critical Incident Technique'
Psychological Bulletin Vol 51 No 4 pp327-358

Fletcher C (1974) Beneath the Surface: An account of
three styles of sociological research London: RKP

Fletcher C, Caron M & Williams W (1985) Schools on
Trial: The Trials of Democratic Comprehensives Milton
Keynes: Open University Press

Fletcher C & Ruddock R (1985) Formation, Transformation
and Participation: Key Concepts in English-Language
Adult Education Studies Cranfield: Department of Social
Policy

Fletcher C (1993) 'Practitioner Research and Adult
Education' Adults Learning Oct.

Fowler J W (1984) Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian
New York: Harper and Row

Freeman A (1993) God in Us: A Case for Christian
Humanism London: SCM Press

French A A (1988) 'Telling Tales from School: A study of
part-time INSET BEd graduates' Unpublished MPhil
thesis, Department of Social Policy, Cranfield Institute
of Technology.

French A A (1989) Developing a Critical Incident
Approach in a Study of Teachers' Lives in School
dsp Cranfield

French A A (1992) 'Data for evaluation: tapping
significant experience - an approach through the
critical incident technique' in Evaluating the quality
of the student experience London: CNA

French A A (1994) 'Respect for Practitioners: some
methodological messages' Unpublished Paper presented at
the BERA Conference.

Friere P (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed New York:
Continuum

Gilligan C (1982) In a Different Voice: Psychological
Theory and Women's Development Cambridge: Harvard
University Press

Glaser B and Strauss A (1967) The Discovery of Grounded
Theory New York: Aldine

Goodson I F and Walker R (1991) Biography, Identity and Schooling: Episodes in Educational Research London: Falmer

Habermas J (1971) Knowledge and Human Interest Boston: Beacon Press

Hammersley M (1992) What's wrong with Ethnography? London: Routledge

Hammersley M and Atkinson P (1983) Ethnography: Principles in Practice London: Tavistock

Haselgrove S (ed) (1994) The Student Experience Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press

Herzberg F, Mausner B & Snyderman B B (1967) The Motivation to Work New York: John Wiley & Sons

Hirst P H (1974) Knowledge and the Curriculum London: RKP

Hirst P H (ed) (1983) Educational theory and its foundation disciplines London: RKP

Hogan P (1990) 'What Makes Practice Educational' Journal of Philosophy of Education Vol 24 No 11 pp15-26

Hutchinson S A (1988) 'Education and Grounded Theory' in Sherman R R and Webb R B (eds) Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods Lewes: Falmer

Johnson R A (1991) Owning Your Own Shadow San Francisco: Harper

Kitwood T (1980) Disclosures to a Stranger: Adolescent Values in an Advanced Industrial Society London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Kohlberg L (1966) 'Moral Development in the Schools: A Developmental View' School Review Vol 24 No 1 pp1-30

Khun S T (1970) The Structure of Scientific Revolution (2nd edn) Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Marton M, Hounsell D & Entwistle N (eds) (1984) The Experience of Learning Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press

Maslow A (1955) 'Deficiency Motivation and Growth Motivation' in Jones M R (ed) Nebraska Symposium on Motivation Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press

- McDowell L (1991) Course Evaluation: Using Students' Experiences of Learning and Teaching Newcastle: Newcastle Polytechnic with CNAA
- McPhail O, Ungoed-Thomas J R & Chapman H (1972) Moral Education in the Secondary School London: Longmans
- Mezirow J (1977) 'Perspective Transformation' Studies in Adult Education Vol 9 pp153-164
- Mezirow J (1981) 'A critical theory of adult learning and education' Adult Education Vol 32 pp3-24
- Mezirow J (1991) 'Misconceptions about transformation theory; a note in reply to L Ekpenyong' International Journal of Lifelong Education Vol 10 No 2 pp159-160
- Moore T W (1982) Philosophy of Education: an introduction London: RKP
- Morgan A (1993) Improving Your Students' Learning: Reflections on the Experiences of Study London: Kogan Page
- Nelson A (1994) 'Researching adult transformation as autobiography' International Journal of Lifelong Education Vol 13 No 5 pp389-403
- Nias J (1991) 'Primary Teachers Talking: a reflexive account of longitudinal research' in Walford G (ed) Doing Educational Research London: Routledge
- O'Connor D J (1957) An Introduction to the philosophy of education London: RKP
- Parlett M and Hamilton D (1972) Evaluation as Illumination: A new approach to the study of innovatory programmes Occasional Paper No 9, Centre for Research in the Educational Sciences, University of Edinburgh
- Peters R S (1966) Ethics and Education London: Allen and Unwin
- Ramsden P (1992) Learning to Teach in Higher Education London: Routledge
- Reid L A (1962) Philosophy and Education London: Heinemann
- Roberts D and Higgins T (1992) Higher Education: The Student Experience Leeds: Heist-PCAS
- Rose G (1982) Deciphering Sociological Research Basingstoke: Macmillan

- Rosen (1991) 'Coming to Terms with the Field: Understanding and Doing Organisational Ethnography' Journal of Management Studies Vol 28 No 1 ppl-24
- Rowland S (1993) The Inquiring Tutor London: Falmer
- Rowntree D (1977) Assessing Students: How Shall we Know Them? London: Harper and Row
- Ruddock R (1981) Evaluation: A Consideration of Principles and Methods Manchester Monograph 18: Manchester University
- Sherman R R and Webb R B (eds) (1988) Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods Lewes: Falmer
- Shimahara N (1988) 'Androethnography: a Methodological Consideration' in Sherman R R and Webb R B (eds) Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods Lewes: Falmer
- Schon D A (1983) The Reflective Practitioner New York: Basic Books
- Sikes P J, Measor L & Woods P (1985) Teacher Careers: Crises and Continuities Lewes: Falmer
- Smart R (1994) On Others' Shoulders Bedford: De Montfort University
- Smithers A and Robinson P (1995) Post 18 Education: Growth, Change Prospects London: Council for Industry and Higher Education
- Stake R (1972) 'Analysis and Portrayal'; Paper originally written for AERA Annual Meeting presentation. Revised at the Institute of Education, University of Goteberg, 1975.
- Stanley J (1989) Marks on the Memory: Experiencing School Milton Keynes: Open University Press
- Strauss A (1977) Mirrors and Masks: the Search for Identity London: Martin Robertson (first pub 1959 USA)
- Strauss A (1987) Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists Cambridge University Press
- Strauss A and Corbin J (1990) Basics of Qualitative Research London: Sage
- Thouless R H and Thouless C R (1990 4th edn) Straight and Crooked Thinking Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton

Tomlinson P (1989) 'Having it both ways: hierarchical focusing as a research interview method' British Educational Research Journal Vol 15 No 2 pp155-176

Trezise S (1993) 'The Same or Different? Two Educational Traditions at a Time of Change' Adults Learning Vol 4 No 5 pp134-135

White P (1990) 'Friendship and Education' Journal of Philosophy of Education Vol 24 No 11 pp81-91

Whitehead J (1994) 'Practitioner researchers should not permit a training in educational research methodology to dominate their creativity in the construction of their own living educational theories' Unpublished position paper presented at the BERA Conference.

Wittgenstein L (1958 2nd edn) Philosophical Investigations tr Anscombe G E M Oxford: Basil Blackwell (first editn pub 1953)

Woods P (1993) Critical Events in Teaching and Learning London: Falmer Press

Yorke M (1991) Performance Indicators: Observations on their use in the assurance of course quality London: CNAA Project Report 30

Young K (1989) 'Narrative Embodiments: Enclaves of the Self in the Realm of Medicine' in Shotter J and Gergen K (eds) Texts of Identity London: Sage