

LITERACY FOR LEARNING IN FURTHER EDUCATION IN THE UK: A SYMPOSIUM

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The *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* (LfLFE) project, a collaboration between two universities – Stirling and Lancaster – and four further education colleges – Anniesland, Perth, Lancaster and Morecambe, and Preston, funded for three years from January 2004 as part of Phase 3 of the TLRP. The project draws on work already done on literacy practices engaged in by people in schools, higher education and the community and seeks to extend the insights gained from these studies into further education. It aims to explore the literacy practices of students and those practices developed in different parts of the curriculum and develop pedagogic interventions to support students' learning more effectively. This project involves examining literacy across the many domains of people's experiences, the ways in which these practices are mobilised and realised within different domains and their capacity to be mobilised and recontextualised elsewhere to support learning.

A project such as this raises many theoretical, methodological and practical challenges, not least in ensuring validity across four curriculum areas in four sites drawing upon the collaboration of sixteen practitioner researchers. This symposium of four papers examines some of the challenges and findings from the first eighteen months of the project. The first paper explores some of the findings regarding students' literacy practices in their everyday lives and those required of them in their college studies. The second focuses on one approach adopted by the project as a method through which to elicit student literacy practices. The other two papers focus on different aspects of partnership within the project, in particular the attempts to enable students and lecturers to be active researchers rather than simply respondents.

STUDENTS' EVERYDAY LITERACY PASSIONS (PRACTICES) AND THOSE REQUIRED FOR STUDY WITHIN THE FURTHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM

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Introduction

'I just can't believe how much they do at home. Before becoming involved in this project, I thought most of them (students) maybe skimmed through a magazine occasionally or texted their friends, but no more than that'. (Mike, a practitioner researcher on the LfLFEproject)

Mike, and his fellow practitioner researchers within the Scottish end of the project, have all remarked about this aspect of their involvement. Their surprise about the breadth and depth of students' home-based literacy practices is one that many teachers in Further Education (FE) would recognise and perhaps even share. FE students, particularly those under 19, are regularly portrayed as a media generation who have no interest in literacy practices beyond playing computer games (Luttrell and Parker 2001). Furthermore those practices which they are thought to be involved in are often devalued (Gee 2003). Yet the data collected by the researchers as part of the LfLFE project have shown that, in the main, students engage in rich and varied literacy practices outwith their formal educational institutions, but these are largely not drawn upon by their experiences within their vocational areas.

In the first section of this paper, I will describe the research project itself and briefly outline its theoretical framework. The second section will explain how the methodology unfolded within the two Scottish colleges and the final section will focus on two students from different vocational areas to illustrate firstly how rich the students' home-based literacy practices are and how these are differently mobilised within their vocational areas.

The Project

The project seeks to examine the literacy requirements of four curriculum areas in each of the four further education colleges. It also seeks to explore the literacy practices in which students engage outwith their college-based learning. We are investigating the interface between the literacy requirements which students face on their courses and the resources that they bring with them to their studies. This interface is described as 'border literacies' which, if they exist, could enable people to negotiate more successfully between vernacular and formal literacies within the FE context. We are exploring the extent to which such border literacies can positively affect learning outcomes and can serve as generic resources for learning throughout the life course. These border literacies are potentially the altered literacy practices that students are already familiar with which become relevant in college contexts.

One of the premises for the project is that the literacy practices of colleges are not always fashioned around the resources people bring to student life and that students may have more resources to draw upon than people working in colleges might be aware. The intention is to achieve a critical understanding of the movement and flows of literacy practices in people's lives: how literacy practices are ordered and re-ordered, networked or overlapped across domains (home-college, virtual-real, reading-writing), across social roles in students' lives and what objects might mediate such mobilisations. Ivanic, *et al.* (2004: 10) warn that the processes of mobilising these border literacies are 'not simple "border-crossings", but are complex reorientations which are likely to entail effort, awareness-raising, creativity and identity work on the part of the learner'. It is worth noting that we are not focusing on the literacy demands of the students' communication or key/core skills classes, but the reading and writing which are integral to and essential for success in their vocational areas.

This paper will concentrate on the experience within the Scottish context in phase 2 of the project. Across the two Scottish colleges (Annie'sland and Perth), there are seven vocational areas being studied: Accounts, Multi-media, Sound production, Construction, Social Sciences, Hospitality and Child-care. The vocational areas chosen depended to some extent on the willingness and availability of staff to take on the role of college-based researcher. Beyond that, we operated the following criteria for selection. There would be one curriculum area in common across all four colleges and this was Childcare. The other areas chosen would span the full range from those in which literacy appears at first sight to be relatively peripheral to those where literacy appears to be constitutive of the area. The areas would include both those that attract under-19-year-old students and those which attract mature students. While most of the areas would be vocational, one 'academic' subject in each college would be chosen where possible.

Theoretical background

The policy agendas of widening participation and social inclusion often position literacy as a key issue to be addressed. Literacy is identified as a significant factor affecting retention, progression and achievement in further education courses in the UK. Much of that agenda focuses on basic skills and works with an individualised deficit model of literacy (DfES 2003). The New Literacy Studies (NLS), the theoretical basis for the LfLFE project, provides a social view of literacy which locates literacy practices (different forms of reading, writing and representation) in the context of those social relations within which they are developed and expressed (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Barton, *et al.* 2000, Gee, 2003). NLS offers a view of literacy as multiple, emergent and socially situated and socially constructed in particular contexts. This work has demonstrated the rich variety of literacy practices in which people engage as part of their daily lives, but also that these are not always mobilised as resources within more formal education provision.

One initial premise of the project is that 'vernacular' literacy practices exist (Barton, *et al.* 2000) and students engage in them. These practices are seen as the sorts of resources for learning that may not be tapped into in all their richness. Research within the NLS umbrella recognises the importance of making the 'vernacular practices' of everyday life visible. Ivanic, *et al.* (2004) argue that text related practices increasingly involve an element of multi-modality and have been influenced by digital and new technologies. They argue that the use of new technology has facilitated a shift in the semiotic landscape towards the iconic and visual as well as the written word. They question whether educational provision has changed to accommodate these wider cultural shifts.

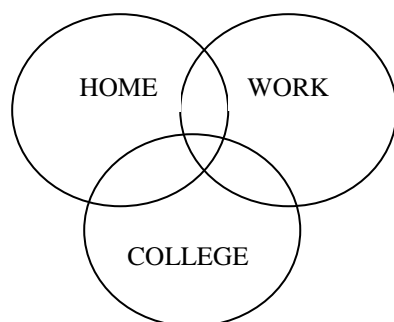
Furthermore, NLS questions the view that literacy is a skill that can be transferred unproblematically from one domain to another. Barton and Hamilton (1998) describe a domain as a structured and

patterned context in which literacy is learned. The notion of transfer has been further problematised by Tuomi-Grohn and Engestrom (2003) who argue that both cognitive and situated explanations of transfer are not sufficiently robust especially when discussing transfer across domains.

Project methodology

Ethnography, as a research method, is very close to the ways in which people make sense of the social context they find themselves and has its roots in anthropology and sociology (Street 2001). The approach is that of illumination and de-cloaking existing practices to provide 'thick description' (Geertz, cited in Holliday 2002: 77). Our aim therefore is to provide depth of description. The data-gathering process has involved the practitioner researchers (of whom there are sixteen) and university-based researchers (of whom there are four). Where possible the students themselves have become involved in the process as co-researchers, not simply respondents. However, it is recognised by the team that for many of the students, the use of the term 'co-researcher' to represent the students' involvement may be more aspirational than evident from practice. Ethnography is a process, not a set of discrete stages, so, as a team, the members of LfLFE have been involved in an iterative process of planning, data-gathering and analysis.

Smith (2004) found in her study of FE students' literacy practices that, when asked directly about their home-based literacies, students tended to say either that they did nothing or that they did very little. To overcome this direct approach, the LfLFE team used a series of 'conversations' with each student. Lillis (2001:10), in her study of HE students' writing, talked about the difficulty of creating a 'space for talking' that was not teacher/student or researcher/participant. This was achieved by using an informal and unstructured approach, more conversation (Radner 2002) than interview. Nevertheless, despite being informal and unstructured, the conversations were focused. The initial one was an informal discussion about the student's life history in which students were encouraged to talk about their family, education to date and reasons for joining the course. The second conversation was based around a 12 hour clock face. Each student was asked to choose a non-college day and write down what they did that day. When it was completed, they were engaged in a taped conversation around the literacy practices that were embedded in the social practices they had identified. In this way students came to a closer understanding of our use of the term 'literacy practices' and they began to move away from a paper-based view of text. After this conversation, they were given a disposable camera and asked to take photographs of their home or work-based literacies. In this third conversation, the students were encouraged to think about any potential or existing links between home- and college-based practices. Did these border practices exist and if so how were they being mobilised by the students? In addition to these individual interviews, two focus group events have taken place. The first focussed on one literacy event within a class observation. The second was an icon-mapping exercise where students were asked to select a number of icons that represented literacy practices that were important to them. Once these were selected the students were asked to place them on a Venn diagram like the one below. From this, we were able to talk about the practices that they felt shared some borders.



Discussion

I will focus this discussion on two students: one from multi-media – Tony; the other from childcare – Rachael. Both are studying at the same level of work- HNC (SCQF level 7, NVQ 3). These students were not selected because they are exceptional cases. Holliday (2002) argues that because people construct the social world, any selection of participants is valid when the aim is to uncover what is there, not present a 'truth' which is generalisable.

Tony

The HN multi-media course is taught within the computing department. Students on the HN course attend college three days a week and are taught and assessed in discrete units by a team of people across the week. As an added value to their course, the students are offered opportunities to undertake web-design projects or enter competitions. All three of the male project students have taken these opportunities. Many of the students within the class spend break and lunch times within the classrooms working on their class work, extra projects or personal projects. The unit focussed on within the research project was 'Introduction to the Internet'.

Tony is a mature student who had been an engineer for over twelve years. He had studied and passed the NC multi-media course the previous year. He was separated from his child's mother and saw his daughter on Saturdays. He lives with his new partner.

Tony described spending much of his leisure time at home involved in literacy practises he felt were directly connected to learning his chosen vocational area. These practices included reading textbooks and computer specialists magazines, downloading tutorials from specialist websites and joining multi-media forums where he could ask for advice and guidance on aspects of the software he was finding challenging. He 'played' with his computer most evenings. He said he did this for fun, not to pass the summative assessments within the units. He could do that without doing any extension work at home. He was motivated to learn more about his area for its own sake. Tony did not feel that what he was doing involved reading and writing. Before participating in the project, he had said he had never explicitly articulated what he did with computing. He was surprised to realise that his work was as literacy rich as it is. In our discussions, he came to understand that his attitudes towards and his practices around reading had changed.

Tony described how his reading (and learning) had changed over the course of his time at college. At the beginning of the NC course, to learn a new aspect of computing, he said that, after listening to the demonstration given by the class teacher to the entire group, he used the step by step guides (which he referred to as tutorials) supplied by the class teacher, reading each step one at a time and then carrying out the step before reading the next instruction. He felt the tutorials were more significant than other handouts. He explained: 'the tutorials are sets of instructions which you need to follow carefully, word for word. The handouts have general background information. You can select which bits to read'. However, now half way through his HNC year, Tony described a different process when he is using a tutorial at home. He quickly reads through the entire tutorial whether it is from a book, a magazine or a website to get a feel for the outcome. Then with the tutorial to one side rather than at his side, he tries out the new feature of the software. He refers to the written text only if he needs some help. He feels that he now needs to visualise what the end product will be and the stages in-between are less important to him. He has the confidence and the experience to experiment and not rely on following step by step written instructions. Another difference is that he now feels he would consult with text books to help his learning whereas prior to his HNC year he felt they made no sense to him. Prior to this year, Tony felt textbooks were for academic people and not for people like him. He gave an example of one of his classmates who he thinks of as academic because he has 4 A levels and had studied at university. After nearly two years of multi-media, for Tony the physical location where these activities take place may be different, but the main features of a literacy practise (Mannion 2005) remain the same: medium used, the text types, the purpose, values and expectations. He does not have significant borders to cross, although he was not himself aware of the border crossing in which he is engaged.

I would argue that there are two reasons for this. Firstly, both the class teacher and the students view the nature of knowledge and learning as a joint activity and secondly the use of ICT itself. Both students and the class teacher acknowledged that he (the teacher) was not an expert in all aspects of computing. Although the teacher provided demonstrations of aspects of a computing package, it was recognised that the teacher could only provide a starting point from which the students had to move on. Tony said: 'What I am learning here (at college), I am implementing at home. The teachers can only point you in a certain direction and you have to do the rest'. In the multi-media classroom students learned from each other as well as from the teacher. They brought in college tutorials they had found on the Internet; they shared magazines and textbooks and they told each other of new sites or forums they found. The students were co-constructing their understanding. When talking about learning theory on which video games are built, Gee (2003) argues that the games are constructed in ways that fit better with the modern high-tech world. I would argue that the multi-media classroom is

potentially equally more suited to that to learners' expectations, experiences and home-based literacy practices. For Tony, this certainly appears to be the case.

Rachael

Students on the HN childcare course spend one and half days in college and two days in placement over the course of the year. At college they are taught by the same teacher across all their units of study. This teacher is also responsible for visiting them and observing their placement work and is their vocational guidance tutor during the year. The students all enjoy a positive relationship with this tutor. The unit focussed on within the project was: 'Assessment Approaches'.

Rachael is a quiet student who, despite being articulate, found it difficult to explain her motivations and actions. In interview, she often responded: 'I don't know'. She had passed some higher level courses while at secondary school, but had decided to leave half way through her final year because she did not want to go to university and thought continuing on an academic course was a waste of time. She lives at home with her parents.

Rachael described a variety and depth of home-based literacy practices around her passion - music. She downloads music from the internet and burns her own CDs. She follows the progress of her favourite bands in magazines and newspapers, wherever possible attending concerts at local venues. Often she uses the internet to buy tickets or music from Amazon. She also accesses websites to find out more about her favourite style of music - Indie. She loves to read novels and keep in touch with friends through email and texting.

Like Tony, Rachael did college work at home. However, all the college literacy events she carries out at home are connected to the completion of assessments, not extension work connected to learning about her vocational area. She reads her handouts as reference material selecting the parts which refer directly to her assessment. Rachael understands the purpose of her academic reading and writing as a need to pass her assessments which will help her gain the HNC, which would then allow her to work with children.

In the classroom Rachael and her classmates had requested that their teacher adopt a teaching method that relied on them copying down bulleted notes from an overhead. The teacher talks the students through each point at a pace they can keep up with. The students feel this approach helps them to memorise the details which they would need to pass the assessments. They feel confident that the teacher has already selected the elements they would be assessed on and they would then later refer to these notes when writing their summative assessments. In this classroom, the teacher is the expert who provides the students with all the information they needed to pass their assessments. The teacher is seen by herself and by her students as someone who has access to knowledge which she passes on to her students directly or through guided reading. Both the students and the teacher adopt an instrumental approach to learning and saw the teacher as the expert. From their focus group discussion it was clear that the students saw their role as passively to absorb the material the teacher provides them with. Reading is geared to focussing only on the aspects of the subject which were required by the assessment.

This view of knowledge fits within a traditional cognitive paradigm which portrays learners as 'disconnected knowledge processing agents' (James and Bloomer 2001 p2). This view has been challenged by socio-cultural theories which argue that learners construct meaning in a dynamic way from their interactions with others, their activities and their environments. Rachael may have carried out college-based tasks in the context of her own home, but the medium, text types, purposes, values and expectations of these literacy events were radically different from her home-based literacy events. Rachael's home-based literacy practices and those of her vocational classroom are so divergent that she is unable to bridge the gap between the two worlds. Indeed she said: 'home is home and college is college'. For Rachael, her home-based and her college-based literacy practices are kept strictly separate.

Conclusion.

Gupta (2004) discusses two kinds of readers: transactional and reduced. The transactional reader is one who can interact with the text to create meaning and enjoy reading; the reduced reader perceives reading as painful and is reluctant to read. Before joining the multi-media course, Tony could have been described as a reduced reader at home and at college. But his approach to reading changed to

that of a transactional reader when he found his passion. He developed an active meaning-making strategy which was based on context and prior knowledge. Rachael, on the other hand, described her home-based reading as transactional, but her college-based reading remained one of a reduced reader whose goal within academic reading was to select the parts of the text which were relevant to passing the assessment.

Luttrell and Parker (2001: 239) state: 'students' recruitment into and experience of being in vocational or academic courses shape how they make meaning of everyday literacy practices'. For Tony the literacy practices around learning multi-media in and out of the classroom and his vernacular practices blended together. He believed he had an active role to play in constructing his knowledge and learning. There were no border literacies because there were no borders. In contrast, for Rachael the literacy practices around both learning and assessment were academic literacy practices, which were removed from her vernacular practices and passions. Her experience of her vocational learning in college was one where meaning and knowledge came as a set of fixed ideas to be learned by rote, rather than constructed through her literacy practices. For her too, there was no evidence of border literacies because the two domains were too distinct. She saw the two domains as separate worlds. As argued by Ivanic, *et al.* (2004) here there would appear to be a requirement to construct border crossings.

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LITERACY AROUND THE CLOCK: AN EXAMINATION OF THE 'CLOCK ACTIVITY' AS A METHOD FOR IDENTIFYING EVERYDAY LITERACY PRACTICES WITH FURTHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Introduction

The first original aim of the LfLFE project is:

To identify those 'border literacies' that enable people to negotiate successfully between informal vernacular literacies and formal literacies within the FE context, that positively affect learning outcomes, and that can serve as generic resources for learning through the life course.

This paper concerns one of the methodologies used as a first step in identifying and examining the literacies engaged in by FE students in their everyday lives. At the same time, data is being collected relating to the literacy requirements of their college courses. It is clear that before border literacies can be identified, the literacies from inside and outside of college have to be recognised and understood.

Rationale for the Method

Literacies for Learning in Further Education draws on the notion of literacy as social practice, with different literacies associated with different domains of life (Barton, *et al.* 2000). If literacies are situated in space and time, then the challenge of uncovering them – for both the students and the researchers - might be to start from places or times. It was perceived as problematic to use space as a starting point, since there is potentially an infinite array of spaces available to individuals. Time, however, is a concept shared by all, with each minute of the day being accountable for – that is to say, each individual is somewhere, doing something at each moment. By contemplating activities throughout the day, it would allow each event to be scrutinised in terms of the literacy involved, allowing for a wide variety of practices to be included as potentially relating to the interests of the project.

Hence, the LfLFE project has been using a methodology based on a 24-hour clock to capture the literacy-related activities of students in as comprehensive a way as possible, before focusing in on specific literacy practices for individual students. Using the concept of the clock face, students were asked to think through one day, recording all their activities which somehow related to reading and writing. Given large sheets of paper and an array of pens and pencils, students produced data in a variety of ways, including writing on or around a clock face, using either one or two clock faces to represent 24 hours and using colour and pictures in ways meaningful to themselves. This method allowed students to:

- (1) take ownership of their contribution to the project, firstly by drawing the clock face in their own way and secondly by choosing what to include on it;
- (2) recognise the amount and kinds of literacy activities they actually engaged in during one day. That is to say, they would not necessarily have recognised that some of their activities were related to literacy at all (e.g. reading teletext, sending text messages).

Interestingly, the clock face has been used in therapeutic nursing for another purpose, namely to bring to a client's attention the amount of time spent on particular activities, such as thinking about, procuring and consuming alcohol (described in Remocker and Storch (1987) as an exercise called 'Time Management'). This could be perceived as a kind of 'shock tactic'. In our case, the students were often 'shocked' into a realisation of the extent of their own engagement in a variety of literacy practices, and an acknowledgement of the requisite skills.

From the outset the project has aimed to collaborate as far as possible with both practitioners and students in FE, with individuals becoming researchers in their own right, investigating their own and their peers' practice. As an early activity with students, the clock proved to be an effective way of engaging students in the research and providing themselves and others on the project with positive evidence of students' own capabilities. In addition, it became clear that without the basis being provided by the students themselves, it would be difficult to formulate the right kinds of questions to cover all the possible literacy events.

An Example

The following is from a set of notes produced after talking to three English Level 2 Child-care students, aged 16-17. The session was not sound-recorded because one of the students, Laura, objected.

All three students had produced their clocks in their own time at home, as there was not enough time during the college day to produce them. They were all on A3 paper, with some detail and very neat. They all said they had enjoyed producing them, and that they took about half an hour.

I asked them if anything surprised them as they were doing the activity. Olivia said that she was surprised that she actually read road signs. Jack was surprised that he read newspapers. They all said that they read all the stickers on the bus and they could remember what some of them said.

Jack had written that he read the back of his cigarette packet – he brought this out, and his pouch of tobacco, and it was only then that I realised they were in Spanish. Jack said, 'I haven't a clue what it means', but then it transpired that he had tried to work out the meaning using the English version – 'fumar' means smoke etc. Olivia also tried to work out the meaning. Then ensued a discussion about different languages – Jack said 'I try and understand different languages, like German, cos I'm really into German bands'. Laura said she knew some Greek, and gave some examples of words she knew. They all seemed interested in the idea of different languages.

Laura said she never reads books – 'I hate reading, I'm not interested'. When asked why, she said I didn't get any praise at primary school so I can't be bothered, I still don't. However, later on it transpired that she does read on holiday – 'just for fun' – she had read all the Harry Potter books (saying 'They're the only books I've ever read') but then also mentioned that she'd read a novel called Broken about drugs and prostitution by someone called Cole.

Jack said he likes to read Stephen King books. He'd recently read Insomnia. He said he likes to go to book sales and try to find Stephen King books.

Olivia said she likes reading, especially true stories. She had read the series of books including A Man Called Dave about child abuse. She saw this as related to her course (Childcare) and said she found it easier to read things when they're written like stories. Jack agreed, and said he had found Adrian Mole – 'the teenage one' [Adrian Mole Aged 13 1/2] – useful when he was being 'knocked about' by his mother's boyfriend. They all said they could 'relate to' things in novels.

Laura was careful to separate her education from her outside reading, for example she said she 'read stuff in the papers, but it's not educational'. She said that she never used to do her reading for homework – she used to pretend to have done it. But she did admit, 'I read more now than I used to'. Both Laura and Olivia said they did not like to read out loud: Laura said she was not confident enough, and Olivia said her legs would shake. (Laura had been adamant that she did not want to be taped, saying she would start stuttering.)

Olivia said that when she had her eating disorder (the others asked her 'which was it' and she said 'both') she read the leaflets given to her by the doctor, 'because she wanted to get better and understand about it'. Olivia also said she would read 'all the newspapers' at her grandad's 'because they're in a big pile there'. I suggested to Laura that she must be able to skim read the newspapers in order to pick out the stories she was interested in. She agreed, and so did Olivia, but Olivia differentiated between this practice and the more detailed reading she did at her grandad's.

When asked about writing, Olivia said she writes short stories. Laura works in a Chinese restaurant, so she takes orders and uses the phone. She said she writes in short hand for the orders, e.g. 'b\b sauce' for black bean sauce. She agreed that the abbreviations had to be consistent so that the kitchen staff could read them.

Jack works at a catalogue shop as a stock room assistant. He said he does SQRs – he said this was 'counting stock' – and puts deliveries away.

Olivia works at McDonalds. She said the only writing she does really is to write down what she wants to eat at break. She says she has to read the boxes of sandwiches, 'even though I know them by the colours', and reads drinks labels when serving. She also reads the numbers on the till when giving change. Laura admitted she found it difficult to add up on the till and she would have her mobile phone open next to her to use as a calculator.

Laura said she is ALWAYS texting, mainly because she has a boyfriend in London, but she also texts other people. Olivia said she doesn't – she waits for others to do it, mainly because she never has any credit.

Jack said he is always on the internet. His mum has a website related to the gothic lifestyle. Jack's job is to check the forums for bad language and behaviour. He logs in, reads through what people have written, and deletes the bad language. Then he sends a message to the perpetrator – this is a pre-written email – telling them not to do it again.

Laura said she is on the internet every night because she has a web cam with her boyfriend, using MSN messenger.

Olivia said she uses email: 'I email my grandad'. Laura said she emails lots of people: 'I've got friends all over the world, so I email people in Ireland, Australia, everywhere'.

Laura said she does all her college work on the computer – probably straight onto the computer because she makes lots of mistakes and it's easier to make it right on computer. Jack and Olivia both said they write it out by hand first.

They all said that listening to music helps them concentrate, so this was represented on the clock at the same time as doing other things. Laura said she writes her own songs, and they all said they read CD inserts.

When I congratulated them on their clocks, Laura said, 'When I do something I have to do it detailed', explaining the amount of really useful detail on her diagram.

The example above shows how the students began to reveal some of their activities, which they may not otherwise have considered as related to literacy. They were genuinely surprised both at how much literacy-related activity they did, and at my interest in it. When the lecturer had first introduced me to the class, she said I was an English teacher at another FE college, and Laura immediately felt she had to tell me that 'I'm no good at English' when I walked round the class. Her initial comment that she 'hates reading' and 'never reads' was apparently contradicted by later statements relating to newspapers and novels she has read and her use of technology for communicating. She clearly demarcated what she considered to be 'educational' or not, and disassociated herself from any such activities. This was an interesting separation for her, because she revealed that she was particularly drawn to reading about cases to do with rape and other things because she is interested in justice, and had wanted to go on a law course before she decided on child care. Laura's initial defensive reaction to me as an English teacher was mollified as she warmed to the non-judgmental nature of our research. Laura's comments indicate her attitude to education, which has apparently been coloured by her experience of school: 'I was never given any encouragement at school'. Taken chronologically, the comments also show how her confidence grew as the interview progressed and as she began to understand the research interests. A positive outcome for the project would be for students such as Laura to feel more confident about their literacy by being initiated into a view of literacy which may not have been espoused within their previous experience of education.

Preliminary Analysis

This activity represented an initial foray into the lives of three students, using the clock face as a stimulus. From this we were able to glean information about some of the literacy events that took place during a typical day – a literacy event being any activity involving reading and/or writing. Through talking at greater length to the students, it should be possible to elicit further details regarding these events to build up a picture of the practices surrounding them. The information produced from this particular encounter represented a number of issues that could be followed up at a later date in individual interviews: for example, Olivia's short-story writing in her own time; Laura's song-writing; the students' choice of reading matter (horror fiction, 'true-life' stories, etc.); their use of the internet and MSN messenger; text-messaging; newspaper-reading; work-based practices in their part-time jobs; and so on. In addition, there emerged aspects of their literacy activities relating to beliefs and attitudes, such as Laura's interpretation of what might count as 'educational'; their identity as part of a specific group of people, such as Jack's involvement in a gothic lifestyle; and what they perceive as the relationship between their college work and their home lives. Through pursuing these issues in further interviews, the intention is to build up thick descriptions of their literacy practices, beginning from 'when' and finally including 'where', 'why', 'how', 'with whom', and 'to what end', encompassing links between all of these elements.

As a way of categorising the range of everyday literacies they encountered in their study, Barton and Hamilton (1998) used the following six areas: organising life, personal communication, private leisure, documenting life, sense making and social participation. Within each of these it may be possible to classify the different literacies that we come across with students. It is only seven years since *Local Literacies*, but the use of technology has advanced hugely in this time. Nevertheless, it might be argued that the literacies associated with these technologies – albeit new – can be subsumed within the existing categories. For example, playing on a game-boy would come into private leisure and MSN messenger use would be personal communication, while use of internet chat-rooms might be seen as social participation. Through gathering a comprehensive set of data regarding students' uses of literacy, the practices – with their associated texts, beliefs, values, attitudes and purposes – should be identifiable.

By sitting with students as they completed the exercise, or by discussing it with them afterwards, students' attitudes to their activities often became apparent. One student, Matthew, filling in his clock with his researcher-tutor, claimed to be unable to remember his activities during the college day. His tutor had to remind him that he was in her class during the period that remained a blank. However, at 5.30pm on his clock, he instantly filled in details of computer games, web sites and so on. This was

clearly a time of day that he looked forward to, utilising his time in a way that mattered most to him. He could see little that linked his college life to his everyday literacies – which included computer games, searching on the internet, and teaching army cadets - and his different attitudes to the two was clear. When it emerged in interview that his school career had been marred by violence and bullying, the possible reasons became apparent. Here was a case where it might immediately be difficult to identify ‘border literacies’, because the beliefs, attitudes and values from each domain appeared to be so separate.

Harry, an A-level student, produced a clock which centres around riding his bike. On his clock – a Monday - his college activities are confined to 2.5 hours in the morning. Most of the rest of this day is devoted to driving with a friend to a skate park 40 miles away and riding his bike. While this might not seem immediately related to either literacy or his college work, through an interview based on the clock it became apparent that his course and college life are intimately linked to his bike-riding because they both relate strongly to his identity. Having been a disaffected and sporadic school attender, he began to ride a bike at age 15. This led to him filming bikers and then taking up fast-track Film Studies and Media Studies A levels with a view to going to University in Leeds to do a course in Media Production and Film Studies. In his interview he talked about a three-minute horror film he was making. Asked whether it was for college or for himself, he replied, ‘For the course and for myself. If I don’t get a good grade but I like it then I’ll be happy’. Considering that one of the aims of the research project is to investigate ways of mobilising literacies across domains, this student’s attitude to his studies as being directly related to his interests outside of college is significant. Given that he described himself as potentially ‘hanging around on street corners and getting into petty crime’ had he not discovered bike-riding, it is clear that this individual’s assertion of identity was crucial to his learning. He described the importance of having goals: ‘something to look forward to – a goal to reach – if there’s something with riding that I’ve always wanted to do and then I do it I’m really happy - it’s the same in life. Getting to uni will be a massive milestone for me ... It’s just what I really want to do’.

‘Crossing Boundaries’

Another student, George, who at the time of the clock activity worked as a restaurant supervisor while also completing a catering course, made clear links between his college life and his work life. This was perhaps inevitable as his course was directly vocational, but significantly he saw his work even in the college restaurant as important as a reflection of himself – although not to the extent it would be if it were ‘his own place’. He described the kind of menus in the restaurant and then added:

G: and then on the left-hand side there’s like, normally an information sheet on upcoming speciality evenings, and last night I just wrote one of those.

C. Right. And is that as part of your course, that you had to write one of those?

G. It’s, it is and it isn’t! I mean it’s like, you get, you can be asked to do them or you might not get asked to do them. ... I quite enjoy doing them.

C. Do you see that as writing?

G. I see it as more like a publishing exercise, like, the graphics, and the way it looks. I’m much more, I prefer like things that look nice rather than if it just had text if you know what I mean. ... Things that are aesthetically pleasing, yeah, definitely.

Asked how he would feel about a spelling mistake on the menu, George replied:

G: Well, it would matter and I’d feel, as soon as a customer pointed that out, whether it was me that wrote the menu or whether it was someone else, I would feel embarrassed because it’s the place where I’m representing ... Yesterday the menus had a, were done, and Mr H [college restaurant manager] had to add something quickly and it came up in a smaller font, and I was a bit, I don’t like that, but not in the way that I would say ‘oh we’re going to have to print out 8 new menus because of it’, but I would feel like, if it was my own place I probably would, do you know what I mean?

George’s production of information sheets to go alongside menus for the college restaurant can be seen as an example of a literacy event which is situated in a time and place, following particular conventions of format and usage, but also – for George – is imbued with values and attitudes to which he subscribes in a professional capacity. Another student in the same situation might be required to produce the menus, but might not hold these values and attitudes – for example, they might not consider it important for the menu to be free of grammatical errors or to be presented in a particular font. George’s personal identification with the values inherent in the literacy practice required for both the course and the effective running of a restaurant may be the key to his success: George, at the age of 20 and still part-way through his course, is now manager of a highly prestigious local golf club restaurant.

Some students, such as Laura or Matthew, apparently see their college literacy-related activities as separate from the rest of their lives as they see their everyday literacy practices as having no value in an educational context. However, since the clock activity and as her involvement in the LfLFE project has progressed, Laura's attitude to her college work and her own sense of self-worth has changed. She now reads aloud confidently in class, even admitting to her course tutor that she enjoys it, and had no hesitation in allowing us to record an interview with her about literacy in her life. Her tutor from the outset has made provision for the students to develop in confidence as part of the course which she chose to use as part of her research for the LfLFE project. This has involved encouraging students to talk and write about their own lives and interests, producing poster presentations on something that interests them, and working to music that they bring in to the class each week. Laura has realised that the practice of reading aloud in class is something that will relate to her work placement, and ultimately to her career - reading stories to children. She has begun to volunteer to do this for the first time. The separation of her two worlds has become less clear-cut and the merging of the two appears to have been of great benefit to this individual, her tutors having noticed a marked change in her confidence.

Moje, *et al.* (2004), refer to 'funds of knowledge' from Moll, *et al.* (1989) and 'Discourses' from Gee (1996) in their study of literacy learning in the secondary school. They argue that students have access to a wide variety of funds of knowledge, such as homes, peer groups, communities, and different subject areas in school. Students also participate – in varying degrees - in a number of different Discourses to which the different funds of knowledge contribute. Some of these Discourses will be those valued by the school and others will belong to peers or groups outside of school. In order to work towards a 'third space', where in- and out-of-school literacy practices can be integrated, teachers and curriculum developers need to develop understandings of the funds of knowledge and Discourses their students have available outside of school (Pahl and Rowsell 2005). By trying to identify border literacies, the LfLFE project is effectively attempting to locate literacies within this third space. Laura's tutor has begun to allow for this third space by integrating students' music and outside interests into the classroom, and further by linking the work they are doing on their own social and self awareness to their future work with children. As the project progresses, it is envisaged that the tutor-researchers' reflections and investigations, and the students' observations on their own literacies can contribute to the development in design of each of the sample units in the next phase.

Future Work

One result of the clock activity is that the project now has a clock from each of the students involved in the research. The clocks represent something about their makers as artefacts in their own right, as well as providing information directly through what is represented on them, and indirectly through leading to elaboration in interviews. The clocks themselves will allow for some comparison, for example, across curriculum areas or genders, as well as some observations about the kinds of texts students choose to produce.

And clearly the further collection of data pertaining to students' lives, which will go way beyond the clocks themselves, will contribute to a deeper understanding of informal literacies. Having completed the clock activity, each student will be interviewed at least once, facilitating a movement from the comprehensive representation of a twenty-four-hour period, to the detailed description of specific literacy events and practices. Some students will be further observed in contexts outside of college, including work place, community-based activities, religion, and the home.

The interviews conducted so far have revealed significant information which can contribute to an identification of the factors required to mobilise literacies from one domain to another. Literacies might be situated, but it is the elements of those literacy practices which are crucial to their successful application which might be the key to mobilising them - as demonstrated by students like George, Harry, and Laura - in order that they may 'positively affect learning outcomes, and ... can serve as generic resources for learning through the life course'.

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RESEARCHING WITH STUDENTS: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

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Introduction

This paper will explore the ways in which the LfLFE project involves students as co-researchers in the research process rather than students being simply as respondents. This raises many issues of roles, relationships and confidentiality in the research process.

Underpinning the LfLFE research is a social practices approach to literacy. Rather than seeing literacy as a discrete set of skills to be acquired by the individual, our conceptual approach understands literacy as a social practice involving people, places, values, purposes, and a range of artefacts and media. As Barton and Hamilton (2000: 7) explain, 'literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy'. Here practice means something 'different from situations where the word *practice* is used to mean learning to do something by repetition.'

Literacy practices are: ... social processes which connect people with one another, and they include shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities. Practices are shaped by social rules which regulate the use and distribution of texts, prescribing who may produce and have access to them. They straddle the distinction between individual and social worlds, and literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals. (Barton and Hamilton 2000: 7-8)

Whereas we are able to observe people doing things with reading and writing, that is, we are able to observe literacy 'events', to understand the literacy practice in more detail requires that one understands what is going on from the perspective of those who are involved in the practice. Furthermore, different uses of reading and writing in a person's life include involvement in different literacy practices: through our lives, our work, our studies, our families, for example, we are involved in a diversity of literacy practices. Some of these literacy practices might be more formal than others: for example, the literacy demands of the students' curriculum area might be more formalised than the literacy practice of scribbling down a shopping list or sending a text message to a friend. Within this project we have referred to these less formalised literacy practices as 'vernacular'.

The Aims of the LfLFE Project

The LfLFE project aims to identify those 'border literacies' that enable people to negotiate successfully between their informal vernacular literacies and the more formal literacies of their FE context. Mobilising literacy resources from their everyday lives into their FE learning might positively affect learning outcomes. An additional aim of the project is to develop, implement and evaluate interventions based on these findings, aimed at mobilising students' use of their vernacular literacy capabilities and 'border' practices as means for learning in FE and other contexts. Therefore, a key aspect of this research is that the LfLFE team are researching the role of reading and writing in students' lives outside of college as a means to understanding how these students might better succeed on their respective courses within Further Education colleges. As we are researching the literacy practices of these students' lives, it is vital that we work with students to understand these practices from their involved perspective.

Methodology

The project is working with both qualitative and quantitative data within a broadly ethnographic paradigm. Within this paper, we will focus on the methods that involve working with the students to understand the role of reading and writing within their lives. The ethnographic approach adopted overlaps with the approach to research carried out by Barton and Hamilton (1998). Ethnographic traditions have four aspects. The first aspect is that ethnography studies real-world settings: we do this on the LfLFE project by dealing with people's real lives – we do not ask our students to take a decontextualised test or to stage photographs of their lives rather than depicting the real situation. The second aspect is that the approach is holistic, aiming at capturing whole phenomena rather than only aspects of literacy. Thirdly, the work is multi-method, drawing on a range of research tools including interviewing, observation, and the collection of documents. Fourthly, ethnography is interpretative and it aims to represent the participants' perspectives rather than seeking a 'view from nowhere'. We endeavour to do this by working with students, paying attention to the points made by them, encouraging them to work with us in making sense of the role of reading and writing in their lives, and discussing our data and our interpretations with them.

A range of research tools have been used to make sense of the literacy lives of the students involved in this research. The first method used was the 'clock' activity. The aim of this activity was for students to reflect on a day in their lives as a prompt for recording all of the reading and writing that they had been involved with during that day. The students were free to choose a typical college day or a day from the weekend. They were then encouraged to break the clock down into segments by drawing lines and either writing or drawing in each segment. The students were asked to indicate on the clocks the activities that they had carried out, for example shopping, watching television, cooking, working in part-time jobs, or texting friends using their mobile phones. Once the students had identified these activities, they were asked to think of the reading and/or writing they had undertaken during these activities. As the activity progressed, the researcher asked the students about what they had written or drawn to obtain more detail i.e. WHERE activities were occurring; WHAT a student meant by, for example, 'chatting online'; HOW LONG or HOW OFTEN an activity might occur. Conceptually we were encouraging the students to shift from talking about literacy events to the literacy practices involved in these.

Following the clock activity, students were provided with disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of the reading and writing activities which they carried out in their everyday lives, for example at home, at work, in their places of worship etc. The brief for these photographs was left as open to interpretation by the students as possible, although we encouraged students to take photographs of texts being used in real-life contexts rather than just photographing the texts in isolation. By using cameras as a research tool, we were exercising the concept of using photography as a collaborative research tool. This collaborative approach to research attempts to challenge power relationships between 'researchers' and the people 'being researched' by developing collaborative and participative ways of working. We were not carrying out research on these students, but we were working with students to understand the role of reading and writing in their lives from their perspective.

Photography in collaborative research has been used successfully in the past by Hodge and Jones (2000). They used collaborative photography as part of an ethnographic study of the bilingual literacy practices of Welsh speakers and as part of a case study of the literacy practices involved in the daily lives of a Blackburn Muslim community of South Asian origin. The authors used the photographs as a tool for discussing in detail a range of personal literacy practices with their co-researchers. This process gave the researchers a greater understanding of the range of social meanings associated with the literacy practices that appeared within the photographs. They (2000: 316-317) argue that a collaborative approach using photography. It is the authors' view that the contribution made by the co-researchers into the process of 'documenting and analysing literacy practices through photography' gives rise to 'a more detailed study with broader perspectives'. This process led to a richer and more valid understanding of the literacy practices of the people who were the focus of their research.

Within the LfLFE project, the photographs were used as stimuli within initial interviews with students. Together the student photographer and the interviewer talked through the photographs, making sense and beginning to analyse the role of reading and writing within these pictures. The interviewer encouraged the students to move from talking about the events captured in the photographs to discussing the literacy practices that these activities involved: why were reading and writing being

done in this way? What were the purposes involved in this kind of reading and writing? Who was the reading and writing for? What were the values attached by the student to these kinds of reading and writing? The interviews were seen as a means of building on the data provided for the research by the clocks and the photographs. Following the recorded interview, the interviewer wrote up the conversation using the categories of literacy practices provided by Barton (2000).






































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|---|---|
| <p><u>Organising Life</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Notice boards  Appointment/student diaries  Calendars  Shopping lists  Bills  College timetables  Timesheets (work)  Bus and train timetables  Other | <p><u>Personal Communication</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Letters/e-mails to friends  Mobile phone texts  Birthday/special occasion cards  Notes left for family/friends  Application forms  Other |
| <p><u>Private Leisure</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Books  Newspapers/ magazines  Catalogues  Poetry/music  Sport e.g. football programmes, fanzines  Other | <p><u>Documenting Life</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Birth certificates  School/college reports  Achievements documented in local newspapers  Records of car services  Family history  Other |
| <p><u>Sense Making</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Instruction booklets  Recipes  College notes  Health advice / medicines etc.  Other | <p><u>Social Participation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Documents relating to group/club membership  Flyers/price lists/menus from going out  Pub quizzes  Politics  Other |

Table 1: Categories from Barton and Hamilton (1998) , amended by Sarah Wilcock for the LfLFE project.

The purpose of these initial interviews with the students was to gain an insight into the life of the student and the different kinds of reading and writing in which the student took part. From these discussions with the students, the researchers found that there were some areas of the students' lives which the students felt happy, relaxed and comfortable discussing, compared to other areas where the students felt less comfortable or confident. In addition, some topics emerged during the interviews which were unusual and could potentially provide rich data for the project. For example, in one interview a student began to talk about her freelance marketing work that she does on a part-time

basis for a local football club. Another student talked of her passion for writing songs and poetry. Following the interview and the writing-up, future areas and topics were identified with a view to these being a focus of future interviews. As understandings developed into the literacy practices of the students' lives, interventions began to be identified of aspects of literacy that might be mobilised into the FE college to enable the student to better succeed on their course of study.

Recruitment of the Students as Co-researchers

The process of recruiting students as co-researchers commenced back in September 2004, at the start of Phase Two of the project. At Preston College the research was being carried out across four curriculum areas of the college – business administration, childcare, construction and science. In each curriculum area, two courses at different levels were selected for research. The aim was to recruit four students from each of the courses in each curriculum area. Initially, the curriculum researcher in each area selected four students for the research, with a view to recruiting a range of students i.e. students of different ages, sexes, backgrounds, ethnicity. These students were then told about the project and asked if they would be prepared to take part in the research as co-researchers.

Currently, the LfLFE team are working with a wide variety of students, ranging from mature students taking professional administrative/secretarial courses, a retired lecturer who is taking a level 1 painting and decorating course for mainly recreational reasons, and a variety of young people including those on courses leading to university to those who are progressing from English Entry Level to Level 1 courses.

Some of our students have been extremely keen to become involved in the work. One group of 16-19 year old childcare students were so enthusiastic that the whole group of 9 students ended up being recruited as co-researchers. However, others have expressed reservations, primarily due to the intensive workload of their courses triggering the fear that taking part in the research would create even more work and worry.

There are dilemmas over how ethnographic research can evolve within a situation where the subject of the research is students' lives and the investigators are students' current teachers. The research process needed to challenge existing power relationships between students and teachers. It is crucial to be non-judgemental during ethnographic research in order to build relationships with the students involved in the research, so that they will afford insight into their lives. Indeed, this was an essential requirement of the ethnographic, qualitative research carried out into the causes, effects and ways to overcome disruptive behaviour within a Further Education college carried out by Brzeski (2003). Here, the research focused on disruptive behaviour within classrooms. It aimed to find out the causes and effects of this disruptive behaviour, how effective the college's disciplinary policy was at preventing and combating this behaviour and what other measures could be taken to eliminate this disruption. In this research, the data was collected directly from the students by means of asking them to complete a detailed questionnaire. The obstacle here was that the researcher was, at the time, the personal tutor of one of the groups of disruptive students asked to complete a questionnaire. The researcher realised that, for these students to provide reliable data, they would have to admit to breaking college rules (which some of the students had vehemently denied doing all year). In this situation, Brzeski (2003: 31) obtained the trust of the students by assuring them that 'the data was purely for her own research and would never be used against them in any way'. The questionnaire distributed to the students gave them the same message, in writing, on the very first page and the questionnaire did not require the students to put their names on it. According to Brzeski (2003: 33) 'all students willingly completed the questionnaire and none of them had any objection whatsoever.'

One of the fundamental requirements of the members of the LfLFE project team is reflexivity. The need for reflexivity is echoed by Winter (1996) who declared that a reflexive critique, which is the process of becoming aware of our perceptual biases, is one of the six key principles of any action research project. On the LfLFE project, the researchers are asked to continually reflect upon their interpretations and understandings, always maintaining an awareness of possible bias. A strength of this project has been the diversity of the research team. In addition to co-opting students as researchers of their own lives, the research team has included practitioners who are seconded for approximately three hours per week to work on the project. These practitioners have a variety of backgrounds and range from part-time lecturers who are relatively new to teaching in further education to experienced full time lecturers who also have responsibilities for curriculum management. In addition, there is a co-ordinator of the research at each Further Education college who is seconded for

two days per week, plus both part-time and full-time researchers at both universities who work with the college-based team. This diversity of perspectives helps to maintain a sensitivity to a diversity of interpretations of events and practices.

Motivating the Student Co-researchers

For the LfLFE researchers to obtain reliable and honest data from the student co-researchers on the literacy practices within their everyday lives, it was vital to keep the students interested and motivated. The research team knew from the start that no financial payment could practically be made to the students involved in the research. However, all the team were determined to continually recognise and value the contribution of the students as co-researchers. A variety of motivational techniques have been employed to clearly demonstrate to the students that they are extremely important to the research process. These techniques have included:

1. Outlining to the students exactly what is involved in the research right from the outset. Details were provided to the students in writing at the very start in the form of a letter of consent. The researchers took time to explain very carefully to the students concerned about their role in the research and pointed out the benefits of being a part of such a huge research project i.e. reference to the role as co-researcher could be put on the student's curriculum vitae.
2. All students have been provided with a personalised 'letter of thanks' from Lancaster University, signed by the Director of the LfLFE project. This letter can be kept by the students in their Records of Achievements and can be referred to at University and/or future employment interviews.
3. Students are always asked to carry out the research activities (for example clock exercise or taking part in interviews) at times which are convenient primarily to the students. For example, some students are interviewed just before a class or just after a class.
4. Students have been involved in interpreting and making sense of their lives, both through the production of artefacts such as photographs and the clocks, and in interpreting these artefacts within the research process.
5. All students have recently attended a buffet lunch, paid for by the LfLFE Project, in the Boardroom at the college. The lunch was attended by the Director of the Project, the College Principal and other senior members of the college staff. It is the first time that many of the students had met the Principal and one student commented that 'the work I am doing must be really important as so many people here are thanking me'.
6. All students have recently been given a small present as a small token of thanks for taking part in the project. The gifts ranged from a Parker Rollerball pen for the mature administrative/secretarial students on the project to files, ruled paper and gel pens for the younger students.

The Dilemmas of Using Students as Co-researchers

The contribution of the co-researchers has been variable, giving rise to dilemmas of using students as researchers in this type of project. The varied contribution is due to the fact that the students are at different levels within the education system and come from a variety of backgrounds. This gives rise to a variety of different motivations for wanting to be involved in the research. These varied motivations were very much apparent during the interview process. For example, one co-researcher is a BTEC science student aiming to go on to university to undertake a degree in physiotherapy. In the interview, this student was articulate and bright, understood the conventions of the interviewing process and was keen to express herself. By contrast, another co-researcher is currently a member of a Level 1 course, having progressed on to this course from an Entry Level programme. In this second interview, the student clearly found the conventions of an interview challenging. This student did not adhere to the turn taking conventions of the usual interview situation, resulting in them, for example, talking at the same time as the researcher, going off on tangents, and not fully responding to questions asked. However, it must be stressed at this point that this lack of formal conversational skills does not diminish the value and validity of the data that has been collected from this person.

During a recent lunch celebrating the contribution of our co-researchers to the project, some of those present were asked to comment on their experiences. One of the 16-18 year old co-researchers from science stated: 'It's enjoyable, by looking more closely at what you actually do read and write everyday and not just in class it's made me realise how much I do read! I always thought of "reading" as someone sitting down and reading a novel but I read at work when I am helping people to decide what they want for their meal or explaining to them. I am happy to take part'. Another, an adult student

who had taught key skills to students for twenty-seven years before deciding on a career change, stated "I have found it highly relevant to me, being on the other end for a change, it has made me think more about communication skills and how important they are in the context of your everyday life and how its moved from written to more electronic'.

Conclusion

In summary, the LfLFE project team are very much of the opinion that the co-researchers, to varying degrees, are happy to be part of the research process. It is clear that the students feel valued and appreciate that their contributions are vital to the success of the project as a whole. It is even more motivating to be working with some of the students who may directly benefit from the LfLFE research. Despite some of the dilemmas of working with co-researchers outlined earlier in this paper, the project team are left in no doubt that the benefit of researching *with* the students far outweigh the benefits of working *on* students.

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THE CHALLENGES OF PRACTITIONER RESEARCH: SOME INISGHTS INTO COLLABORATION BETWEEN HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION IN THE LFLFE PROJECT

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This paper examines the advantages of practitioner research and some of the difficulties that have arisen as a result of an ongoing collaborative project between two institutions of higher education and four institutions of further education. In coming together for a research project, there is the necessity to recognise the distinct histories and cultures of colleges and universities.

Arguably, the 1990's witnessed the imposition what might be described as the industrial/managerial approach to teaching in schools and colleges. What is taught is largely prescribed and students have to undergo standardised tests. At the same time, colleges are inspected at regular and frequent intervals to ensure they are being properly managed and the teachers are performing their duties adequately. Verma and Mallick (1999) remark that the nearest analogy to this process is that of a large industrial concern where raw materials arrive at the factory gates, are subjected to various prescribed processes and finished products are sent to market to realise their added value. They also add that, to the best of their knowledge, few, if any, of the changes brought about by the 1988 Education Reform Act, which instituted these changes, were based on research findings.

By contrast, educational research in HE is informed theoretically by the perspectives of the time in various disciplines that feed into educational theory. Quantitative methods are associated with positivistic claims for objective research, whereas qualitative methods are associated with phenomenological claims for meaningful interpretations of social practice. In reality the distinctions are not so clear cut. Quantitative methods are sometimes rejected as positivistic, but as Davies (quoted in Walford 1987: 243) points out, 'All sociologies... are empirical and positivistic if they collect and generalise about data'. Quantitative research can also involve qualitative assumptions and vice versa. Most research projects are predominantly qualitative or quantitative but usually have elements of both approaches. The LfLFE project is no exception using mixed methods within a largely ethnographic

framing. This gives a particular orientation to the project, which may jar with the industrial/managerial culture associated with FE.

The Project

Members of teaching staff in four different FE Colleges were to be recruited as participant researchers within the LfLFE project. The research began with the perspective that a collaborative, team-driven approach was desirable, as 'asking how participants understand, value and construct ideologies around what is being done, clearly points to the collection of first-hand, "insider" accounts in which subjects talk/write/reflect about their own literacies' (Street 1995: 258). The use of participant-researchers is an appropriate and powerful method of plunging deep into the culture and environment of the research setting in ways that would be very difficult and time-consuming to achieve otherwise. It also provides that interesting dimension within the research of the 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives. So potentially the research should benefit from working with the immersed practitioner-researchers, but then also gain the insights brought to the process by the 'outsiders' from the higher education (HE) institutions involved.

All these are positive constructions but they do carry with them certain costs. In the first case - Participant observation is not a 'soft option' but requires constant self-reflection and learning. It is dialogical in that subject and object remain in communicative contact in the course of which a fusion of horizons may occur: the sociologist has to become socialised into the particular form of life of his subject whilst being able to widen the 'horizon' of the latter through offering a differing account of a given situation. (Bleicher 1982:143)

So utilising participant-researchers presents us with the immediate challenge that the perspectives, values and language-codes of both the FE and the HE members of the team have to be transcended in order for effective dialogue to take place. This can never be a completed process but is ongoing throughout the project. In a real sense therefore, both FE staff and FE students ideally had to become actively, not passively, involved in the progress of the research project. By itself, this is difficult to achieve.

A tenet of the ethnographic approach adopted within the project is the assumption that the researcher from one cultural situation can understand and 'read' the cultural artefacts and discourses generated within the processes under study. However, sometimes it is valid to question that assumption. Whilst the gulf between HE and FE is not so complete that communication cannot occur, there are still issues in that process. They are, so to speak, two sets of educators separated by a common language!

This can be addressed by drawing upon dialogical traditions. An important tenet of the pragmatic and dialectical traditions is that forms of thought are determined by forms of practice. For new forms of thought to develop, changes in practice are sometimes required. To develop new ideas one must have possibilities to test these ideas and to interact directly with those engaged in the practices under study (Chaiklin and Lave 1993). Reconstructive analysis seeks the insider's view. However, there is a dialectical play between insider and outsider views. There is never a totally inside view, just as there is never a totally outside one. People constantly make outsider claims, third person claims, about events. This is the way people communicate. We are inside a culture, when we understand how our subjects themselves distinguish between outsider positions and insider positions. Understanding someone else necessitates a movement between an outsider and an insider position. Understanding occurs not through occupying one position or the other but rather in learning the cultural movement between them. Understanding is inter-subjective, not subjective nor objective. The hope is that by creating a dialogue between the practitioners and their students with their insider knowledge and the researchers with their outsider knowledge, new insights and new practices will develop.

This requires of a research team attempts to 'bridge the gap' between the two institutional forms, a constant process of examination and reflection as the research proceeds in order to establish a common language and common procedures. Even so, there are and will be points of discontinuity. For example, to begin with, the process of setting up the research and launching it took much longer than was anticipated by the HE members of the team. Further many of the FE staff involved started with an expectation that HE staff would provide them with an established set of procedures and operations that they would be required to carry out, without themselves having to take responsibility or be involved in making decisions that would shape the research. One College-based researcher was presented with a document designed to give guidance for classroom observation, and the immediate

reaction was; this was meant for someone who 'made a job out of doing observations'. Teacher practitioners are concerned to get tangible and quantifiable results from research that means something in terms of their work. University-based researchers are aiming to do the same thing, but it might be that both parties have a different perspective as to what the work is.

Educational research in FE is informed by the perspectives of the time. For example, in British government policy-making, statistical work has held a dominant position, which has had implications for the more quantitative approaches towards research which are dominant within FE. HE has for a long time done research on FE using practitioners as subjects or gatekeepers in order to get to their students, rather than asking the practitioners to be actively involved in the research process. Negotiation with practitioners has to take account of the priorities of the professional practitioner; the survival of the work itself depends on the continuation of this relationship, which might well involve considerable modification of original aims on the part of the researchers. On the other hand, the survival of the research team as academics or writers depends on a successful presentation of the research 'product', which may have to be sanitised and idealised if it is to be accepted. A key role has therefore been the work of those members of the research team who have provided the link between the HE and FE staff, negotiating the two disparate worlds, and juggling distinct sets of values and assumptions.

Practitioner research is one way to provide the cultural immersion required by ethnographic research and the price tag that comes with that strength is one of time. The research process itself is inevitably slower and more complex as the team grows, discovers and invents ways to move the research forward whilst establishing a meaningful discourse within the team itself. A simpler and more direct research methodology would be quicker and easier to direct, but would also be lacking in the richness, in the 'thick description' that this method is aimed at developing.

From the above, it becomes apparent that the priorities of practitioners and researchers of education are not always in line. So for a study such as ours, which is largely qualitative and ethnographic, there are important issues, since 'analysis of meaningful social phenomena, ... proceeds hermeneutically in that they take as their starting point the dialogically established self-understanding of social actors and interpret it as a particular in relation to the general that is manifest in it' (Bleicher 1982: 139). So we face the challenge of getting at an understanding of the 'self-understanding of social actors' and that, in turn, presents us with the substantial challenge of trying to build a working cross-institutional research team.

Practitioner-researchers

What of the response to the research project from staff in the FE sector itself? In the first case, the challenge was to find FE staff willing and able to become participant-researchers. The process of recruiting members of FE staff for the research team was not unproblematic. It might be thought that FE staff would welcome the notion of being involved in a very positive way with the business of developing a richer understanding of the practices and processes of learning in the FE sector. Whilst many were, matters are in fact not that simple. In effect, the sub-text of discussions with potential recruits was about the concern - 'were they being required to take on additional work for which they would probably not be properly paid, and which would represent an additional work-load for which they would not be given adequate time to cope?'

Aside from this worry, some were intimidated by the view that it would involve them in 'academic' activities that they had left far behind in the days of their teacher-training. There were some indications from staff that their perceptions of the kinds of skills and literacy practices possessed by HE researchers was that they were appropriate and necessary for the purposes of carrying out research, but, by contrast, their own skills and literacy practices were inadequate to the task.

At the same time this perception that HE staff were trained and able to do research in ways that FE practitioners were not, was also coupled or 'knotted up' with a view that HE practitioners would ask of the FE staff things that were unreasonable or in important ways 'artificial'. That is to say, there was and is a perception among FE staff that the ways of the theoretical and academic world have nothing to do with the world of the actual and the practical.

Getting past the initial difficulties of the caution and hesitation of some FE staff was not a simple matter. However, it is also the case that many FE staff were keen to participate but often found that

their enthusiasm was not matched by other staff in their department or by their department head. Indeed it quickly emerged during the opening phases of organising the research that the 'culture' of the department was at least if not more important to the research, and for that matter to the day-to-day practice of the staff concerned, than the culture of the whole College as an institution. FE staff working as practitioner-researchers on the research project have to function within the normal operations of the department and sometimes priorities clash. In fact in a recent report published by the Scottish Further Education Unit, a support body for FE in Scotland, (Elliot 2005) one of the main barriers to participation in research was identified as being the fact that 'there is no support for college researchers'.

Many of the practitioner researcher thought it would be the role of HE staff to check their procedures and activities to make sure that they were 'getting it right'. The notion that there might not simply be a right or wrong way to carry out the research was not only absent, but was positively resisted. The practitioner-researchers persisted in assuming that HE staff were not only going to provide the 'right' way to carry out research, but would also 'judge their performance' and would re-direct what they did in order to meet some undefined standard set at HE level.

Institutional Cultures

There is a macro level to the research which is about the general social environment, the workings of the sector, the ways in which policy imposes certain limitations, priorities and systems upon practitioners and students alike. At this level, the work of the project has had to encompass elements of the value-systems and priorities of the Colleges as institutions and of the system as a whole. These values and priorities reflect the priorities established by government and the wider societal value-systems within which the institution operates, but it must also be about the value-systems that are generated within the institutions. These tend however, to be more about what happens at the meso level. This is the level at which the values and attitudes at work within the department impinge upon the operations and practices of the staff involved. And there is the micro-level involving an analysis of the literacy practices of students.

Another of the dimensions of analysis is the relationship that has evolved between the HE institutions and the FE institutions. So, in a sense, we are required to look at horizontal layering in social relations that may have an impact upon the phenomena under study, but we also to some extent have to take account of the vertical divisions between the institutions involved. The priorities and interests of FE staff are somewhat different from those in HE. In FE, the priorities lie in facilitating the learning process and that process is tightly defined by learning outcomes, assessment schedules and HMI inspections. It is the day-to-day of meetings, marking and guidance. There is no space within this culture for discussions about research interests, when the priority is discussing the organisation of resources, the timing of assessments and the next curriculum meeting to talk about the revision of unit specifications. HE has similar pressures but, in many institutions, there is also an established space for research.

As a result staff engaged upon research projects are stepping out of the institutional norms. Even in institutions that are supportive at a management level, the perceptions of colleagues is really more significant on a daily basis. For colleges and for departments, research can seem no more than something of a diversion, a 'pet project' and an indulgence that is tolerated as long as it does not interfere with the 'real work'. It does not do to overstate this element of the experience of the project. It is not outright opposition to the research, but an attitude that can and does exist, in some instances, alongside a supportive rhetoric and is therefore a subtle pressure rather than an obvious hostility. Nonetheless, it is an attitude that arises out of the cultural norms and is therefore quietly powerful. At the meso level then, participant-researchers can face real difficulties, but they also have to face on a personal level the challenges and demands of the work itself, work that in many cases is quite alien to their experiences and which can ask of them very difficult questions.

In the attempt to construct a working relationship between HE and FE therefore, the challenge of the different cultures is one that is, in some respects, quite obvious and direct, but it can also be quite subtle and difficult to identify. FE and HE staff live and move within institutional cultures that have much in common, but these very similarities can and do conceal significant differences which in fact are exposed and made concrete within a research project that thrusts the two sets of institutions into direct contact.

At the same time, the challenge for each of the members of the team, FE and HE is to recognise the ways in which their own practice is informed and affected by the cultures they move within, and the implicit, unstated but still very powerful values and attitudes that organisational culture engenders. Becher (1989), in his study on the cultures of disciplines in higher education, attempts to identify the linkages between the social and the cognitive, between what he calls 'academic tribes' and the territories they inhabit. Disciplines are conceived as having recognisable identities and particular cultural attributes. An individual's sense of belonging to his or her academic tribe is manifested in a variety of ways. It is, however, through the medium of language that some of the more fundamental distinctions emerge. The above relates just as much to different curriculum areas in FE as it does to disciplinary areas in HE. Becher argues that the professional language and literature of a disciplinary group play a key role in establishing its cultural identity. 'The tribes of academe, one might argue, define their own identities and defend their own patches of intellectual ground by employing a variety of devices geared to the exclusion of illegal immigrants' (Becher 1989: 24). Alongside structural features are the more explicitly cultural elements: their traditions, customs and practices, transmitted knowledge, beliefs, morals and rules of conduct, as well as their linguistic and symbolic forms of communication and the meanings they share.

Given the nature of the experience of the research project, even as the project pursues the examination of literacy practices among students, it inescapably involves us in examining our own practices and with it our values and attitudes and brings up to the surface sets of implicit judgements and assumptions. That in itself can be a painful process. As Gadamer (1981: 404) has put it -

The process of communication is not a mere action, a purposeful activity, a setting-up of signs through which I transmit my will to others..... It is a living process in which a community of life is lived out. ... human language must be thought of as a special and unique living process in that, in linguistic communication 'world' is disclosed.

Conclusions

Practitioner-research as a method of pursuing ethnographic research is challenging and difficult. In some respects the process is itself the point of the research. Being engaged in such work challenges the world-view of each member of the research team and particularly each practitioner-researcher. It challenges practitioner-researchers to re-examine the nature of their practice. It also focuses upon the assumptions, the implicit value-judgements that often affect and direct the ways in which practice operates. For all these reasons this kind of research is of great value to those who participate in it, at whatever level.

Still it is valid to ask if the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Research work carried out this way is slow as each step of the process is hedged about with difficulties. Negotiations around arriving at working practices, shared understanding of language, and on the very manner in which the research is conducted are not resolved quickly and indeed carry on throughout the project. That in itself, of course, is not a negative, as the process of negotiation and communication carries its own value for the members of the team and for the research work, but it does take valuable time. It also carries certain costs for those who are participants, as they find that their own practice is challenged in various ways, and as they meet certain institutional barriers and problems, experiences that can be painful. In some respects it might be said that a research project could be carried out a great deal more efficiently and effectively simply by taking on professional researchers and setting them loose to get on with it. But it would be an importantly *different* exercise.

The power of participant research lies in the partnership of researchers and practitioners in that both have to question their own practice by the very nature of the process. Yes there are costs. However, it is important that these costs are borne and that the value of participation is recognised at both an institutional and at a departmental level in FE institutions, but also at the level of policy making. Such recognition has to go along with an awareness of the fact that participant research takes time and needs time to take place and to evaluate.

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