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'I always wanted to do second chance learning': identities and experiences of tutors on Access to Higher Education courses

Hugh Busher[a]*, Nalita James[b] and Anna Piela[c]

aSchool of Education, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK; bVaughan Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK; cDepartment of Theology and Religious Studies, Leeds Trinity University, Leeds, UK

There is a dearth of literature on Access to Higher Education (AHE) tutors, which this paper addresses. Tutors play an important part in constructing emotional and academic support for students. Understanding their constructions of professional identity and their views of the students they teach helps to explain the learning environments they create. The empirical qualitative data comes from a study of AHE students' and tutors' views of their experiences on AHE courses that was collected in seven rural and urban AHE-providing institutions in the East Midlands of England in 2012–2013. It was analysed using open or inductive coding to reflect the emphases given in their interviews by participants. Emerging findings suggest that tutors' commitment to 'second chance learning' arose, in part, from their own biographies and recognition of the disempowerment experienced by AHE students who were often economically disadvantaged and had had negative experiences of schooling and/or a period of work before joining the course. Tutors' sense of agency and identity and the cultures on AHE courses were negotiated each year through getting to know the students, meeting their extensive demands for support, directing their teaching and learning experiences and contesting the institutional contexts of the courses.

Keywords: personal histories; agency; collaborative cultures; (in)equality; deprivation

Introduction: the focus of the study

Existing research (Jephcote, Salisbury, and Rees 2008; Towler, Woolner, and Wall 2011) highlights the specificity of teaching in further education (FE), acknowledging its differences from secondary school and university teaching. However, there is a dearth of literature about tutors on Access to Higher Education (AHE) courses, the students of whom tend to have a different biographical profile from other students in FE, where most AHE courses are provided. This paper addresses that dearth. The qualitative data representing tutors' views of themselves and their AHE students and courses are taken from a study that was carried out in seven rural and urban AHE-providing institutions in the East Midlands of England in 2012–13. The study took a social constructivist perspective (Lave and Wenger 1991), using a linked case study design (Miles and Huberman 1994) to triangulate the perspectives of participants within and across colleges to enhance its trustworthiness. A total of 24 tutors

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*Corresponding author. Email: hugh.busher@le.ac.uk

across the colleges were interviewed individually or occasionally in groups at the beginning and the end of the academic year. The qualitative data from the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using inductive or open coding (Corbin and Strauss 2008) powered by NVivo to construct themes that reflected participants' own constructs of themselves and their contexts.

Access to Higher Education courses prepare adult learners (older than 19 years) for entry to higher education. It is nominally a one-year diploma qualification aimed at those 'excluded, delayed or otherwise deterred by a need to qualify for (university) entry in more conventional ways' (Parry 1996, 11). About 40,000 adults register on Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)-recognised AHE programmes each year, of whom about 20,000 enter Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (QAA 2013). These courses are underpinned by a powerful social justice agenda. They attempt to redress the balance of educational disadvantage (Jones 2006, 485), helping to attract 'second chance' learners (Fenge 2011, 375) into FE colleges, which are the traditional sites in England and Wales for lifelong learning and continuing education. Students of Access to Higher Education, as mature applicants, are also seen as a key population of potential students for HEIs to meet widening participation targets for recruiting non-traditional participants to tertiary education. These targets are set by central government as part of a range of performative criteria for evaluating HEIs and attract additional government funding to HEIs (Hinsliff-Smith 2010).

Becoming an AHE teacher

Tutors' identities are dynamic, not fixed. They develop their projects of the self (Giddens 1991) and their sense of agency through time. These identities are constructed through discourses with other people individually and in groups and social structures, such as institutions and policy discourses (Kearney 2003) and through the intersectionality of class, gender and ethnicity that are reproduced by society (Chandra 2012). Although a person has unique characteristics of gender, ethnicity and social class, as well as certain personal characteristics, these may be performed differently in different circumstances (Paechter 2007). Further, people are reflexive about how they live in the world and relate to people and social structures around them. So the self can be seen as being constructed through discourses about the self with itself (Archer 2003) and with others and with the social structures around it (Ecclestone 2007). These dialogues with the self, or reflexivity, allow people to engage actively with the world around them (Hammersley and Treseder 2007) and develop their sense of agency for constructing chosen actions in the world within the contexts in which they find themselves. Kearney (2003) discussed how the children of immigrant parents have to learn to negotiate identities that reflect both their heritages and their positions as citizens of a country different from that in which their parents grew up.

Biographical experiences create forms of reflexivity that help people to shape their identities (Cieslik 2006) through their constructions of the social worlds through which they move. Teachers talk at length about their experiences as students and how these shaped their understandings of themselves as teachers, as well as talking about their interactions with others as important building blocks in developing their careers (Busher 2005). In this study, many tutors seemed to empathise with their students who were 'second chance' learners, because they had had similar experiences themselves:

> I left school at sixteen and worked. Then I went to London … and … had various enjoyable but not particularly well-paid jobs. When I was in my late-twenties I came back into education and I moved back up here. I did a photography course in FE, City and Guilds, and then I did an NVQ. Then I went to university and then came back and did the 7307 and then PCGE. So it's a long convoluted route. (Tutor Coll 3)

> I started work in the Trustee Savings Bank as a young girl and went on to do different jobs and then I just decided I was going to go back to school and do A-levels. Did an Open University Course to get my degree whilst I was working here. I came as a volunteer to work with people with learning difficulties. And then I've been a mature student. (Tutor Coll 1)

But there were other tutors, some of whom were younger and were also AHE coordinators (Colleges 1, 4, 6), who engaged with AHE morally as an important route for non-traditional learners but recognised that the course had to meet the demands of the FE institution to which they belonged given the policy discourses that surrounded the institution.

A common aspect of tutors' stories was their preference for teaching adults. In most cases this was based on experience of having taught younger students:

> I teach in this area because I like teaching adults … I was offered work doing taster sessions for children from a high school and it was a horrific experience for me and sort of cemented the fact that I love our learners. (Tutor Coll 7)

> I've taught younger students, you know, and it's sort of okay. You get fond of them in the end like you get fond of your pets, but it's not the same thing, and I just love teaching adults. (Tutor Coll 2)

In some colleges, too, tutors taught both A-level courses and AHE courses and commented on the differences between the groups of students on the two courses. An important factor for these tutors was the sense of commitment that mature students brought to their studies: 'I enjoy teaching mature students that want to be here. I couldn't be bothered with those little children that didn't want to be here anyway' (Tutor Coll 2). One consequence of students' sense of commitment seemed to emerge in their behaviour in class: 'We don't really get behavioural problems' (Tutor Coll 7). Other tutors welcomed not only working with adults, but also adults who had a range of different challenges that impinged on their studies: 'Most of our Access students come with baggage and I really like supporting them and encouraging them and helping them to get on' (Tutor Coll 2).

Tutors' enthusiasm for AHE courses and students

The tutors in this study were very proud of AHE as an appropriate course for preparing mature students for university and for giving a second chance to learners who, for whatever reasons, had previously suffered discouraging experiences of learning. For tutors, an important aspect of AHE was teaching students how to work as university students by helping them to become 'properly independent learners and researchers' (Tutor Coll 2). So the procedures students had to follow were more closely aligned with HEI practice than with that of schools:

> Our submissions policy for assignments is hard-copy assignments through the …. If an assignment is going to be late they have to download an extenuating circumstances form from the Internet, borrowed from a University's freely available copy. (Tutor Coll 2)

Tutors contrasted the work on AHE courses with that on A-level courses because the latter are often described as the gateway qualifications for entry to university. Further, like A-levels, AHE courses are designated as level-three courses. Tutors thought that:

> Access is the best way to train somebody for university because … the Access Programme [in] the way in which it's delivered [… and] assessed, is much more like university than A-levels ever would be. Our students are often working at university level anyway, albeit on paper [on] a level-three programme. (Tutor Coll 5)

Several tutors viewed students' experiences on A-level courses quite negatively, considering the teaching and assessment approaches used on those courses as inappropriate for helping many students develop their skills and identities as successful learners: 'We know from teaching on A-level courses, it's really, really, really hard to do it that way. Access nurtures people in the right way' (Tutor Coll 7). This, in several tutors' views, was compounded by the school experiences that many AHE students had had: 'Couldn't cope with school and were badly taught, or they were being bullied, or they had learning problems that were never picked up' (Tutor Coll 1). This low self-esteem was compounded by personal and social factors, which are discussed in more detail below.

Tutors acknowledged that undertaking AHE courses was a very tough challenge, in part because AHE students covered 'in one year of study, the same effectively as the kids do with two years of A-level study' (Tutor Coll 1). In addition, many 'Access students … have homes to look after [… and] other jobs they have to go to. They have very little social life because they are so committed [to their studies]' (Tutor Coll 1). However, tutors thought that the rigour of the course was worthwhile because it increased AHE students' 'self-esteem and their ability to get a job that they really enjoy and to have an aspect of their life which they would never have had' (Tutor Coll 2). Further, it provided the 'only second chance option for adult learners who've been out of education' (Tutor Coll 7).

As well as acknowledging how arduous the AHE course was, tutors also recognised that many of the non-traditional adult students who undertook the course faced a variety of social pressures, despite which many of them were successful on the AHE course:

> Well she was 53 years old when she came back into Access for a start. She left school at 15, fell straight into a job. Her father had told her she was thick when she was at school …. Had been married for however many years …. Had five children …. Lived on a house-boat …. Had a variety of jobs. She struggled …. Discovered she was dyslexic and got her a little bit of learning support … a light bulb went on in her head … she grew in confidence, passed and went to university. (Tutor Coll 1)

Tutors also celebrated those students who not only were successful on AHE courses themselves but also supported other members of their family in developing their learning. A not infrequent example was of stories of women who used the example of their own work as students to inspire their children:

> I met up with one only recently who was one of my first group on the Access Course who is now an occupational therapist and loving it and just wanted to thank me for how Access had changed her life. She was here at the University … bringing her daughter to do a psychology degree. (Tutor Coll 2)

Understanding students' social situations

To work successfully with their students, AHE tutors have to understand how students' identities are shaped by the discourses that surround them. As a considerable proportion of AHE students are likely to be women (QAA 2013; Busher et al. 2014), many are likely to be shaped by particular discourses around gender that shape how women are expected to behave in particular circumstances, whether seeking access to university or improving 'their access to income and employment that draw on and reinforce a collectively gendered sense of self that is central to the process of both obtaining resources and doing gender' (Gallagher 2007, 227). Some students also hold strong views about what constitutes 'proper' processes of teaching and learning (Gonsalves, Seiler, and Salter 2011), which can inhibit how teachers construct learning opportunities unless tutors understand and engage with these views. Students, as well as tutors, carry with them their histories and their previous constructions of identity (Chandra 2012), as well as 'transposable skills, such as solving mathematical problems, using statistics, estimating, and crafting an argument' (Gonsalves, Seiler, and Salter 2011, 391). Taking the time to understand the students and the communities from which they come helps tutors to build 'a culturally responsive space that is not built upon pre-determined, deficit assumptions of what constitutes the cultural features of these communities' (Gonsalves, Seiler, and Salter 2011, 391).

Tutors in this study commented on the range of circumstances that students brought with them to the AHE course that made their lives very complicated:

> Health, family circumstances, maybe low self-esteem, quite often mental health issues as well as ordinary health issues, complex families, caring responsibilities, financial problems, trying to keep the wolf from the door as well as do their Access Course, and caring for family, for older people. (Tutor Coll 7)

The student cohort increasingly included younger students, in part reflecting the pressures of government policies as well as the exigencies of the labour market. Many had poor educational backgrounds and came from and with low-paid jobs but hoped to 'become midwives, and lawyers, and psychology professors, and teachers, and nutritionists' (Tutor Coll 1). A lot of the AHE student cohorts were women, tutors claimed, some of whom had 'left school at sixteen and had a child. So they're bringing up a child. We've even had a few students that have already got a degree in something else and want to perhaps go into teaching' (Tutor Coll 6). As another tutor explained:

> I find a lot of my students … have a sort of gap period between leaving school before sixth form age to raise children …. They've perhaps had a poor or negative attitude to secondary education anyway and that they come back to [education] realising, 'Now I'm older and wiser I've got more chance to actually … get a job, [and] more interest in education, in the subject itself'. (Tutor Coll 1)

Women students were perceived by tutors as needing support, 'both in terms of childcare and in finance sometimes' (Tutor Coll 6). Some were fortunate in having working partners or parents who helped with childcare or family income generation, although the women often had to continue working, too, to balance the family budget, even if they worked fewer hours than before they began their AHE courses (Busher et al. 2014): 'It's the ones that are on their own … have had real problems with in particular childcare … do tend to struggle' (Tutor Coll 6). However, the

AHE courses also disturbed existing family relationships, in some cases leading to the break-up of marriages. In part, this seems to have been due to the way that men and women had constructed masculinities and femininities in their relationships, which growing success on the AHE course challenged. As one tutor explained:

> The little woman is now finding her voice and finding her confidence and got a whole life outside of her marriage and some blokes are very threatened by it and can't cope with it. (Tutor Coll 1)

In some cases it led to women abandoning the AHE courses. In others it led to women abandoning their partners.

If gender issues were of considerable importance to many of the students, financial issues also seem to have given many students difficulties as they tried to balance their needs to generate income, often through low-paid jobs, to support their families and their needs to create sufficient time to carry out the AHE studies properly: 'Most of them live, you know, they live in a flat or a house or whatever and then pay rents, mortgages, unlike the youngsters you see' (Tutor Coll 6). As another tutor explained:

> Causes a lot of pressure … [students have] this constant sort of contradiction between having to be here and having to be at work … a vicious circle. They have to have a job in order to fund being a student, but sometimes if their work calls on them, they can't go to college because they're at work. (Tutor Coll 6)

One of the reasons for this determination was:

> Because they can see if they can get over this particular problem, get into university and get a bit of money through student finance, they can hopefully get a better job then they'll be alright. (Tutor Coll 7)

However, some students could not cope with the financial pressures and left the course or missed sections of it to the detriment of the progress of their studies. Tutors found themselves having to listen to various hardship stories, some of which related to students' families: 'Christmas is a bad time because quite a lot of people take on extra shifts because they need the money because they want to buy their kids presents' (Tutor Coll 7).

Working with students in unequal partnerships

Access to Higher Education courses act as sites of transition and transformation for students shifting their identities as learners (O'Donnell and Tobbell 2007). For many students on AHE courses, returning to formal education involved a considerable risk because of their previous unsuccessful experiences of formal education or because of their views of themselves as learners (Gonsalves, Seiler, and Salter 2011). They tended to be very under-confident about the value of the social and cultural capital they brought with them to AHE courses and had constructed an inappropriate habitus (Bourdieu 1990) for successful learning. To make matters worse, people in new spaces, such as classrooms or colleges, often feel disoriented/disempowered because they are unfamiliar with the culture, social structures and flows of power in them (Pierce 2007). This tends to destabilise people's sense of identity, especially when new participants' cultural knowledge of practice and power in a school or classroom lacks sophistication compared with other members of it (Pierce 2007). Tutors can counteract these pressures in part by constructing emotional and academic support,

whether for AHE students or for other adult learners (Jones 2006; Scanlon 2009; Crowther, Maclachan, and Tett 2010), which contribute significantly to students' individual successes and help to build confidence (Crossan et al. 2003).

Tutors on the AHE courses tried to help students to address their perceived deficits by trying to be available, approachable and able to understand students' various situations and needs. Some of the tutors in this study construed this as working as partners with students, rather than treating students as subordinates: 'I feel with the majority of the students it is … much more sort of equal. I always say to them, "We're learning from each other"' (Tutor Coll 5). The personal support which tutors gave to students seems to have depended largely on tutors' interpersonal skills:

> I had students, April, May time who just said, 'I'm not finishing', 'I can't do it, I'm too far behind' …. My persuasive skills are very good but there were some of them who just would say they [couldn't] …. My argument is, you've got to here, if you don't do this now you are no further forward than you were before. (Tutor Coll 7)

Being an AHE tutor had several different facets. One involved teaching subject areas and transferable skills (Tutor Coll 4). Another involved ensuring that AHE students met the formal requirements of their courses: 'So we're now starting to monitor attendance. So that's when we'll be picking up the ones who are a bit erratic who need [help]' (Tutor Coll 2). As tutors in this study perceived it, 'If they attend, if they attempt the assignments, we will get them through. What happens is they miss because they're ill or their children are ill. Or they have to work' (Tutor Coll 7). These formal aspects of education are essential for helping students to be successful on the AHE course:

> Providing students with clear course goals, topics, due dates, timely feedback and assisting them to collaborate in effective ways with their classmates allows them to develop productive interactions both with content and other students, which in turn advances joint knowledge construction. (Shea and Bidjerano 2013, 368)

A third facet was offering students practical advice on how to solve the learning problems they faced: 'do an action plan, do this assignment over the weekend and bring it in on Monday' (Tutor Coll 7). But even this could not always help students who were trying to negotiate how they could meet the study requirements of their courses as well as the demands of the workplace:

> I've had three on [benefits] the last week who've come to me with problems because they're on Job Seekers Allowance … they have to be actively seeking work and be prepared to take a job if it's offered, and yet they're here on 16 hours course for a year. The employment service can get very heavy with them. (Tutor Coll 6)

Helping people to understand the informal as well as the formal social processes through which people co-construct their professional or work-related identities (Jurasaite-Harbison 2009) in particular institutional contexts helps to diminish senses of disempowerment. Informal social support, such as asking 'a neighbouring friend for help if they had a problem with their computer' (Gaved and Mulholland 2005, 7), was seen as important by the majority of AHE students (Busher et al. 2014). Tutors in this study recognised the importance of these informal processes of learning: 'If they miss a session, they've got to have someone who's going to say, "where were you?" when you come in, "Here are the notes"' (Tutor Coll 2). They remarked, too, that this supportiveness between students led to sustained networks of learners that continued to some extent beyond the end of the course (Tutor Coll 3). As well as

fostering discussion among the students and independent learning, tutors thought the learning of IT skills was an important aspect of AHE courses to help students work together. Familiarity with digital technology (Cook-Sather 2006) gave students the resources to access materials they needed for learning that were provided on college virtual learning environments, websites and other media, such as email, which could be used for contacting tutors. For some students, acquiring these skills helped them to construct Facebook sites where they could collaborate with each other on course tasks or share their worries about them, as several tutors noted: 'That's one of the things that we're saying about increasing the number of Facebook and other social media groups …. We need to look at how we can facilitate that' (Tutor Coll 2).

Listening to students' voices is also an important aspect for tutors working as partners with students. It allows tutors to find out what aspects of a course students find worrying and where they think they need extra help or support: 'You get to know the ones who are struggling and the ones who need reassurance earlier than you do the others' (Tutor Coll 2). This is as important on face-to-face courses as on hybrid online/offline courses where, in addition, 'students with low technology skills' might feel 'pressured and anxious', which may 'create a negative impact on learning' (Leh 2002, 36). Listening to students' voices also helped tutors to be aware of the range of socioeconomic problems that the students were facing and how they were trying to cope with these. It allowed tutors to give support to students where they could in scheduling or re-scheduling work assignments.

However, the complexity of tutors' work with AHE students had a noticeable impact on tutors' personal lives:

> It's hard work and it's very stressful, very demanding, but the rewards are [that] at the end of the year you can see such a change in the students …. It's the most fun I've ever had and still got paid …. You meet so many different people with such different lives. (Tutor Coll 1)

It included tutors being in contact with students outside class time and sometimes after the working day had ended.

Being a tutor in institutional contexts and discourses

The institutional context in which AHE tutors work includes the classrooms where they encounter their students, college policies, teaching and learning practices, college cultures and course sub-cultures. It involves moral and political activity, which constitute the managing, monitoring and resolving of value conflicts, where values are defined as concepts of the desirable (Hodgkinson 1999). Resolving these conflicts ethically and transparently, in keeping with previously established social and moral norms in an institution or community, leads to greater social cohesion (MacBeath and MacDonald 2000) by constructing shared narratives or cultures. These cultures define the core practices, values and boundaries in and of a community (Wenger 1998), such as a teaching group or institution, which occur in particular places/spaces at certain times (Busher et al. 2014). Decisions taken by tutors and students are not taken in isolation but are also scrutinised by the gaze (Foucault 1977) of more senior members of a college's organisational hierarchy and of the Award Validating Agency that awards the Diploma for the AHE course in different regions of England and Wales. Teachers and students have to comply with the values and choices projected by this evaluative gaze.

The dispersions and constructions of space and time in institutions, as well as access to these sites, are conduits and sites of power (Foucault 1977) that privilege some people's engagement because of the micro-political processes of the institution (Jurasaite-Harbison 2009). This is very clearly shown by some tutors in this study who thought AHE courses were marginalised in their colleges through the geographies of exclusion that were constructed by senior staff:

> I think it's more the Access Course than the location. I don't think we necessarily look at ourselves as working in a college. We work on the Access Course and we see ourselves as separate to the rest of the college, rightly or wrongly. (Tutor Coll 7)

> We've actually lost our students' base room where we did most of our teaching … our students are all over the place. There is nowhere at the moment for [Tutor name] to keep students' folders. We've lost that facility. We used to have a small room. That's gone. The Access sense of identity, we're keeping it together ... the tutors, but the … infrastructure's appalling this year. A couple of my students today, you know, said, 'We're a prestigious course. Why are we being treated as though we're not?' (Tutor Coll 5)

It left some tutors feeling betwixt and between in terms of their identity, neither part of the A-level team, nor part of vocational education, nor part of the HE part of the college where one existed. It left them feeling separate:

> We're a hybrid in many ways. We've kind of been put in the A-level team. There's talk about us moving into the higher education [department] from next September and therefore Access to Higher Education would be quite a nice seamless link. At the moment downstairs there's the Higher Education Common Room. Our students now go in there from this year. (Tutor Coll 5)

Tutors' status and interactions with students and their institutions were also circumscribed by tutors' authority arising from their formal positions, such as that of a teacher (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The latter leads to AHE tutors' identities being essentialised (Easthorpe 1998) in some ways by their institutions and their students:

> I'm the Coordinator of Access to HE. I teach history on Access …. I've been here about nine years. [Curriculum Coordinator] delegates and I help organise interviewing, screening processes and admin side of it. (Tutor Coll 1)

Institutional discourses reflect policy contexts

The current (2014) British government emphasises the importance and value of education for developing an economy centred on knowledge and skills (BIS 2010, 2012). It has prioritised the involvement of young people under 24 years old, in part to lessen the impact of high youth unemployment, rather than ensuring increased participation by those groups of people who are currently under-represented in higher education. This is portrayed in government discourses as 'fair access' to higher education, which ensures 'that all [of] those with the ability [should] have access to higher education' (BIS 2012, 4), but only young adults aged 19–24 years undertaking their first full level 2 or level 3 qualification (the latter being equivalent to A-level in England) will be fully funded. Older students can only get loan support. This policy discourse has drawn significant criticism from groups involved with work-based, vocational and adult education who have argued that broader participation should be about providing second and third educational opportunities for adult learners who have been unable to benefit from the school system (Fenge 2011).

Tutors' actions were scrutinised by the gaze (Foucault 1977) of more senior members of a college's organisational hierarchy, who took careful cognisance of national government policies. Tutors were concerned that they would not meet the performative targets that agencies of central government used to regiment their work. An AHE coordinator in one college expressed fear that:

> … we will be hauled over the coals [by OFSTED] because they will say, 'Well why haven't you got this in this room or why haven't you got that?' And the reason will be because it's not our room. We're going into somebody else's room. (Tutor Coll 5)

Several tutors expressed worries that they would not meet the recruitment and retention targets set by their colleges, although AHE courses in several colleges seemed to be retaining between 85% and 90% of their students, fairly remarkable figures given the socioeconomic challenges of many of the AHE students. This success might, in part, have been due to tutors' ability to give extensive pastoral support to students and convince students who had good academic potential but low self-confidence levels or, perhaps, family or financial problems, to stay and continue with their studies. Although some tutors expressed concern that new recruitment requirements that AHE students had Maths and English GCSE breached the values of AHE – '[Access] is designed to take people with no qualifications sometimes and coach them to achieve' (Tutor Coll 2) – few thought the requirements would make any difference to retention rates – 'So if you look at the stats … I say it makes not a scrap of difference to whether they stay in the course or not' (Tutor Coll 7) – which the new entry requirements were intended to improve.

Conclusion

Tutors' commitment to 'second chance learning' seemed to reflect, in part, their own biographies and their recognition of the disempowerment experienced by the economically disadvantaged AHE students. The latter had often had negative experiences of schooling and/or a period of work before joining their AHE course. Tutors negotiated the cultures on AHE courses each year through getting to know their students and meeting their students' extensive demands for support. But each year they also had to negotiate these cultures and their own sense of identity, what it meant to be an AHE tutor in a particular college, with the institutional contexts in which they worked. While tutors claimed they tried to work in partnership with their students, none the less, the cultures on AHE courses were not necessarily 'cohesive and homogenous social objects' (Handley et al. 2006, 642) as they were imbued with power and unequal relationships between students and tutors, in part imported from power-laden policy contexts (Foucault 1977). Tutors were held accountable for the performances of their students by their colleges, as agencies of central government policy. This performative screw was enacted through the surveillance of senior staff and the use of measures of performativity (Jeffrey and Troman 2012) to exert power over tutors and students.

Access to Higher Education students appeared to learn most effectively when they felt well supported (Jones 2006) by tutors and by informal support structures amongst the student body. This support appeared to contribute significantly to students' individual successes and help to build their confidence as learners (Crossan et al. 2003). Dillon (2010) noted that Black minority ethnic students on AHE courses welcomed supportive learning cultures to counteract their senses of social

disadvantage. As tutors in this study noted, the importance of such an environment reflected the tensions that many AHE students faced in balancing the different demands in their lives between supporting families, earning sufficient wages to live and undertaking a strenuous course of study which, in about nine months, brought their level of knowledge to the equivalent of a two-year A-level course. However, providing this support generated considerable stress amongst tutors as it put great demands on their time outside normal class or college hours and involved them taking the trouble to get to know the personal circumstances of all their students, building the culturally responsive space that Gonsalves, Seiler, and Salter (2011) had found useful for tutors in their study. None the less, tutors seemed to feel a moral responsibility for trying to help as many students as possible to be successful in their studies. This reflects the notions of Giddens (1991) that the project of the self through which people construct their senses of identity, as the tutors did in this study, involves the development and enactment of (moral) values that are defined as concepts of the desirable (Hodgkinson 1999). These values were enacted through the managing, monitoring and resolving of value conflicts to create successful learning communities (Wenger 1998) on AHE courses, with which tutors strongly identified as the purpose of their work as teachers on AHE courses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Hugh Busher holds a PhD in the micro-politics of schools and supervises Masters and Doctoral students in the School of Education, University of Leicester. His research interests include critical perspectives on people, power and culture in education-based communities, representations of students' and teachers' voices, and hybrid learning communities.

Nalita James, senior lecturer in the Vaughan Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Leicester, has research interests in the sociology of education that include: higher education; transitions from school to university and from education to work; changing patterns of education, work and identity; lifelong learning; and education policy.

Anna Piela is lecturer at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Leeds Trinity University. Her research interests include sociology of gender and education, in particular inequalities in education at different levels from primary to higher education amongst both educators and students.

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